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A MOMENT THE LONE RIDER SAT LOOKING AROUND THE SAVED CAMP, AND THERE WAS SOMETHING AWE INSPIRING IN HIS MANNER.

OR,

The Rustlers of the Bad Lands.

A Romance of Northwest Nebraska.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,
AUTHOR OF "DISMAL DAVE'S DANDY PARD,"
"OLD BOMBSHELL," "CAPTAIN MYSTERY," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE BANK OF THE NIOBRARA.

It was sunset at the close of a mild, hazy October day. The long, slanting rays of the vanishing day-god fell upon a pleasant scene in the midst of a small grove of bristling cotton-woods, where a pleasure party was encamped, upon the south bank of the Niobrara in Northern Nebraska. Four tents had been pitched in the

form of a square in the grove, and the blue wreath of smoke which arose above the tree-tops seemed to indicate that the evening feast was being prepared. Just beyond the grove a number of horses were picketed so that they could graze, and were watched by two cowboys.

It was a merry party gathered there by the river, for several ladies were present, and they did much to make the trip pleasant. Elias Errol, of the River Ranch, was the organizer and leading spirit of the party, which, in search of "big game," had come far up the Niobrara. His wife was with him, and his merry, blue-eyed, golden-haired daughter, Nida, was the life and pride of the party. Jot Skywood and wife, of Sunset Ranch, formed a part of the little company. Colonel Delos Danglar, an enthusiastic and intimate friend of Mr. Errol, having done the rancher a good turn a short time before, was one of the organizers of the expedition. Sam Krick, the guide, with the attendant cowboys from Sunset and River Ranch, made up the entire company.

Colonel Danglar was a tall, well-built man of forty-five who carried himself after a military manner. He was rather a dark-complexioned person, having dark eyes and wearing a full dark beard. He claimed to be looking for investments in Nebraska, and said that if he liked the country he should turn rancher. He was an agreeable man, a pleasant talker and possessed of considerable magnetism. During his short acquaintance with Mr. Errol he had won his way into the rancher's good graces and had been granted the privilege of winning Nida for his wife if he could obtain her consent.

"But, the girl was not at all charmed with the dashing colonel. Indeed, she rather feared and disliked him, although she treated him with the respect due a friend of her father. For some reason a feeling of aversion came over her whenever Danglar approached. This feeling she concealed as well as she could, but found it difficult to hide it, entirely. She was amazed when the colonel asked her to become his wife, and stated that her father had already given his consent, and, in an instant, the man learned in what estimation "the Prairie Flower"—as she was sometimes called—held him. He went away, baffled and angry, but not till he had told her that he knew of her love for a young prairie vagabond whom her father would never accept as a son-in-law. From that hour Nida avoided the man whenever she could.

Over the fire, the smoke of which curled above the cottonwoods, the women were cooking supper, while Nida had spread two cloths and was making things ready for the feast. When supper was quite ready the cowboys and the guide gathered around one of the cloths, while the ranchers, the ladies and Colonel Danglar sat down around the other. The meal passed off with many a joke and many a burst of laughter. All were hungry and everything tasted delicious.

When all were satisfied, and the sun had disappeared from view, some of the men gathered in a group to smoke while others attended to the horses, all of which were to be watered from the river. Old Sam, the guide, was among those who produced their pipes and settled down to smoke. Sam was a genius in his way, being a little, homely, comical-appearing old fellow with twinkling eyes and bearded face. One of his chief delights was the telling of wonderful yarns and recounting the shrewdness of his "Uncle Josh," whom he seemed to think the sharpest man in the world. If any one expressed a doubt concerning yarns of his wild adventures, he would declare that he could prove them, if Old Nick Rickway was alive. Rickway had been a vagabond hunter and guide and was often Sam's comrade on many a long trail. But, it was said that he had met his death at the hands of a treacherous red-skin who pretended to be friendly. Sam mourned his old pard sincerely.

"Old Nick wuz a pesky good sort o' feller," the guide declared, when they had lighted their pipes, after eating, and were reclining on the ground. "Him an' I swore by each other an' it nigh bruck my heart w'en I heered as how he wuz cut down by er durned tre'cherous Arrap. (Arapahoe). Nick knew Uncle Josh, an' ef he wuz alive, he'd tell ye that er keener man never pumped air inter a good pair o' lungs.

"Speakin' o' Uncle Josh kinder minds me o' ole Zeke Truck an' how he uster try ter meck out that he wuzn't loosin' his eye-sight arter he wuz so blamed blind that he c'u'dn't see a hoel through a ladder. Zeke had allus had mighty keen eyes an' it made him feel like thunder w'en he foun' that they didn't reach out like they uster did. He got inter a habit o' tellin' how fur he c'u'd see an' he w'u'd give ther truth er

monst'rous stretchin' sometimes. But at last Zeke he got ter tellin' sich outdacious lies that ther neighbors bekem disgusted an' got so they didn't believe much o' ennythin' he sed, though he did tell ther truth 'bout 'most everythin' else.

"One day Zeke rode inter taown with Uncle Josh. Josh wuz goin' in on business. Waal, they had er leetle church in taown with ther alldingdest high steeple ye ever saw. I don't want ter say jest how high thet steeple wuz, but it must 'a' bin nigh onter two hundred foot. Zeke had bin over ther groun' hundreds o' times an' he knew thet ther top o' thet steeple c'u'd be seen at ther Three Oaks, jest nine miles frum taown, so w'en they got along thar Zeke p'inted torrud whar he knew the steeple wuz an' axed Uncle Josh ef he c'u'd see it. Uncle Josh c'u'd jest see it an' thet wuz all, an' he knew thet Zeke c'u'dn't see it ter save his gizzard, so he axed ther ole man ef he c'u'd see it. Zeke he guv a snuff o' disgust an' sez:

"See it? 'Course I kin! I kin see ther hull top-end o' it; an' by gosh!" sez he, 'there's er fly a crawlin' up torruds ther vane. I kin see him jest ez plain ez kin be, can't you?"

"Then Uncle Josh he draw'd up an' stopped the team an' pretended ter be tryin' ter see ther fly. Then he putt his han' back o' his ear an' 'peared like he wuz listenin' powerful hard. Putty soon he sez:

"No, Zeke, I can't see ther ternel insect', but I reckon he's thar fast ernuff, fer I kin hear him step!"

"Uncle Josh sed Zeke never spoke erg'in all ther way inter taown. Thet wuz ther kind o' er man Uncle Josh wuz, jest ez smart ez a steel-trap, an' I c'u'd prove it ef Ole Nick Rickway wuz alive."

Sam's story provoked a burst of laughter, and Colonel Danglar, who had joined the party, said:

"It's er pity, Sam, that Old Nick is not alive so that you could prove that such a witty man as your Uncle Josh really does exist."

Sam rolled over and stared through the gathering gloom at the speaker a moment, maintaining a profound silence. Finally he gave a contemptuous grunt.

"It's er blamed pity thet ther Almighty used up so much wit upon Uncle Josh thet sum other folks wuz deprived o' their reg'lar 'lowance o' common sense," after which shot, the old guide relapsed into a silence which he maintained till he heard his companions discussing the recent raids upon the rancher's cattle by an organized gang of "rustlers," who were supposed to have a hiding-place somewhere in the Bad Lands lying between the Niobrara and the source of the Loup Fork.

"They have made it decidedly hot for us lately," observed Mr. Errol. "We have done our best to get our hands upon them but have utterly failed."

"We have given them one or two decidedly hot races, declared Riata Rube, a daring young fellow who had been chosen chief of the cowboys on River Ranch. "Once we followed them clean into the heart of the Bad Lands."

"And then they got away?" questioned Colonel Danglar.

"They did," acknowledged the cowboy chief. "Bad Lands Bill is their leader, and he is as crafty as he is bold."

"I hardly think I care to invest in this section till these cattle-thieves are cleared out," said the ex-officer. "Where are these Bad Lands?"

"Not more than six hours' ride to the southwest," replied Rube. "It is a strange, weird section of sand-hills and clay, cut into a thousand fantastic forms by old watercourses. There are lots of little alkali lakes, and sometimes one will be found that is fresh. It affords a complete hiding-place for the rustlers."

"If we are so near as that, is there not danger from the thieves?" asked the colonel.

"I hardly think so," answered the cowboy. "Bad Lands Bill is not a fool, and he will know that we have not much for him. We keep a good watch on the horses. The rustlers will not be very likely to run the risk of losing a number of men just to get a few horses."

"But thar are more than hosses here," said the guide, as he glanced significantly toward Mr. Errol's daughter, who was moving about in the glow of the firelight. "Bad Lands Bill might work fer ransom-money."

The rancher started up nervously, and Colonel Danglar turned toward Sam to observe:

"I believe that these outlaws are in the cattle business and not women-thieves, eh?"

"I don't reckon it 'u'd meck enny difference ter them w'at kind o' business they do so long ez it brings in ther skids," grunted the guide.

"They're a nasty set o' white crimynal renegade reds, an' they'd stoop ter enny kinder game thet Bad Lands Bill p'inted 'em at."

And then he arose and walked slowly away toward the horses, as if he would take a look around to see if everything was all right.

Half an hour later the moon rose.

Nida had strayed a short distance from the camp and stood beside the rolling river, watching the silver light as it fell upon the tiny waves. A way through the cottonwoods she could see the camp-fire, the light of which fell upon the tents and the moving figures. She longed for solitude and moved still further away. Again she paused and gazed upon the water, but her thoughts carried her far away. She seemed unconscious of her surroundings, for she was thinking of the young and handsome lover, Prairie Paul, whom Colonel Danglar had once contemptuously called a young vagabond.

Suddenly something caused her to look up. She knew not what it was, for she did not hear a sound, but a short distance away she saw something that caused her to utter a little cry of surprise and alarm.

Plainly revealed by the pale moonlight she saw a milk-white horse and a rider that appeared to be a young girl dressed in snowy, flowing garments of a gauzy, transparent nature. The face of the strange girl seemed very white and she appeared to be watching Nida on the bank. Both horse and rider remained motionless for several moments, then the apparition in white lifted her arm and made a slow gesture, which Nida interpreted to be one of warning. The next instant, apparently of his own accord, the horse wheeled and galloped away over the plain.

And not a sound broke the silence—not a hoof-stroke came to the listening ears of the amazed girl on the river's bank!

CHAPTER II.

THE STRUGGLE ON THE SHORE.

THE Prairie Flower seemed stricken motionless with surprise. Who were they?—what were they? Was it a spirit horse and a spirit rider she had seen? If not of an unearthly nature, why had not the horse's hoofs made a sound as the animal moved away? Soon horse and rider appeared to melt away in the white, misty light that lay over the rolling plain.

A feeling of awe—almost terror—came over the girl who stood alone beside the Niobrara. What had the strange phantom-like being on the back of the milk-white horse meant by that slow, significant gesture? Did the pale rider mean to warn her of some hidden danger? Something seemed to tell her that that was the true solution of the singular movement.

Nida looked around her. She was alone. Faintly she could see the glow of the camp-fire through the cottonwoods, but she could not now discern the tents. Close by, the river made a low rippling murmur as it chafed its low banks. A faint breeze came over the plain and stirred the fallen leaves at her feet causing them to seem to rustle and whisper in an ominous manner. She turned and was about to hasten to the camp when she heard a step close at hand, which caused her to pause with one hand pressed to her throbbing heart as she gazed around.

"Nida!"

The name came floating out of the shadows, but in her unreasoning terror she did not recognize the voice. A tall, dark form loomed up before her and then stepped out into the moonlight.

It was Colonel Danglar.

The girl gave a little sob of relief as she saw who it was, and actually drew nearer the man whom she so disliked, uttering an exclamation of joy.

"Oh, I am so glad it's only you!"

The colonel seemed a bit surprised at such a greeting, but he quickly advanced to her side, saying:

"I saw you wander away all alone, and I feared you would get into some trouble, so I followed. I hope you will pardon the liberty."

Nida was in the mood to pardon almost any act done by one whom she considered a friend of her father, and she said:

"Certainly; it was very thoughtful of you."

The ex-officer was not a little surprised by the manner of the girl who had so often shunned him and who had come very near openly expressing her scorn for him when he asked her to become his wife; indeed, he was flattered as well as surprised, for he reasoned that her feelings toward him were changing, else why the change in her manner? But, looking closer, he saw that she was very pale and trembled a little.

"Why, Miss Errol, you are frightened! What has happened?"

She gave a nervous little laugh, as she answered:

"Nothing much. I suppose I am foolish to be alarmed at such a thing, but it did seem so strange."

"What was it?" he urged.

Then she told him what she had seen. He appeared not a little surprised, but when she had finished, he said:

"Then it must be that there is something in the strange stories which I have heard the cowboys tell about the White Spirit of the Niobrara. I thought it simply a creation of their brains, but if you really insist that you saw such a thing, there must be something in it."

"I certainly saw it, colonel."

"The cowboys say that it is an Indian legend that a white maiden was captured by the reds but escaped from them on the back of a milk-white horse. She is said to have perished on the plains somewhere here, and to this day her spirit wanders over the prairies on a white steed, as if seeking for the friends whom she failed to find in life. Some of the cowboys claimed to have seen her, but I did not credit their stories. However, since hearing your story, I do not know what to think. I am not very superstitious."

"I surely saw what I have told you of, colonel; and whether it was a spirit or not, it filled me with terror by that strange warning gesture. I fear that there will come some harm to the expedition before we return."

"Nonsense!" laughed Danglar. "Her gesture may have been simply a salute. Of course she frightened you; that was natural. But, I would not worry about it at all."

But Nida shook her head, for she could not forget how sadly the water had murmured, and how ominous had sounded the whisper-like rustle of the leaves.

"I am certain that there is trouble in store for us," she asserted. "I heard the men talking of Bad Lands Bill and his lawless gang, but until then I did not dream that we were so close to the territory where the Rustlers have their retreat. I fear that the desperadoes will give us trouble."

"Riata Rube does not seem to think there is much danger. He says that the Rustlers would not run much risk to obtain the few horses there are with the party. But there is a greater prize than horses."

Although he tried to make his words very significant, she did not understand him, for she said, in surprise:

"A greater prize—what do you mean?"

"Can it be that you do not understand?" and he drew a little closer. "The great prize is yourself."

For a moment she looked startled, then she broke into a nervous laugh.

"I fancy they would find me far from a prize. I hardly think Bad Lands Bill will face a great deal of danger to get possession of me."

"If that is true it is because he does not know you," asserted the colonel, and she saw his eyes gleam strangely. "If he knew what a prize you really are, he would face flames infernal to obtain possession of you. Even such a wretch as people say the chief of the Bad Lands Rustlers is could not help falling in love with you. If he did, he must be a wretch, indeed."

The girl made a gesture of impatience.

"Please do not speak to me of such things," she entreated. "I have heard enough of people falling in love with me."

"Still they cannot help becoming enamored just the same. Love is something which we cannot control. If we could, I would not be here at this moment. You must know that you are beautiful, Nida; but besides your beauty, there is a strange untold charm about your manners, your smiles, your laugh, your walk, your slightest move that makes you far superior to girls with faces and forms which at first glance one would pronounce as beautiful. Even in absolute repose, there is an air—a something—about you that makes you a thousand times more bewitching than most maidens. You must not be offended with me for telling you this, for I swear I cannot help it!"

The man had drawn nearer and nearer, but she shrunk away. The intense passion which filled his face and eyes, which she understood in his flowing words, filled her with a feeling of alarm and aversion. She put out one hand as if to ward him off.

"Stop, Colonel Danglar! Once I requested you to never speak to me again like this. Have you no regard for my wishes?"

"Nida—Nida, you must pardon me, for it is

my love that makes me bold. If my love was not as true as the heavens above us, I would not dare speak to you again, remembering your words as I do."

"Sir, true love is never bold, it is always modest and retiring, it is always careful not to give the object of its passion pain. Your love is not of that kind. Let me pass."

But he stood in her path.

"Not so fast!" he answered, almost fiercely.

"You shall hear what I have to say! You know that I love you, love you madly, yet you treat me in a manner that drives me to desperation. If I do something bad in the end, you alone will be to blame for it."

She drew herself up to her full height, her blue eyes shining like twin stars, as she cried, scornfully:

"That is a good way to talk to one whom you profess to love! Such talk as that fills me with contempt. As if I am to blame for not loving you! As if I would be accountable for your acts! Colonel Danglar, you talk like a boy who has lost his head."

Her words seemed to sting him to desperation, for he strode forward and clutched her wrist, as he said in a low, intense tone:

"You do not love me, you say. You forbid me speaking to you of love, yet you come here alone beside the river that you might think of one whom you fancy you love—one who is not worthy of a thought from you. What is Prairie Paul but a nameless nobody—a plains tramp? He does not even know who his father and mother were?"

"It is not his fault," she retorted with spirit, although his fierce grasp was hurting her. "His parents were probably murdered by the Indians when they made him a captive so long ago that he does not remember the time. Old Nick Rickway snatched him from the clutches of the red fiends and gave him a name. Although Paul Rickway is a nameless nobody, as you have called him, he has my true love. Release my wrist, sir!"

"Have a care, Nida Errol!" came savagely from Danglar's lips. "I am not a man to be openly defied."

"Do you threaten me?" she exclaimed, her voice full of contempt. "You are a brave man—a soldier—and you threaten a woman. Yes," with a sudden blaze of anger, "I defy you, coward!"

That word stung like a slap in the face, and the colonel reeled back into the arms of a man who had crept silently up behind him. At the same instant, Nida was seized in the arms of another man who had come up behind her, and before she could utter a cry, a broad hand was clasped over her mouth.

"Knock ther cuss senseless, pard!" hoarsely whispered the man who held Nida. "Give him a belt on the cokernut, an' we will slide with ther gal."

"I can't—do it—dern him!" panted the other, who appeared to have his hands full with the struggling colonel. "He—is wussen an eel—rot his—sk-skin!"

Indeed, the ex-officer seemed to be making a terrible though silent struggle. Round and round whirled the two men; the colonel evidently doing his level best to get at the unknown who had caught him round the body in such a manner that his arms were pinned to his sides. Their hoarse breathing told how fiercely they were battling.

"Give him yer knife, Jack!" hissed the one who was still holding his hand over the maiden's lips.

"Can't—git—at—it," the other managed to reply. "By ther holy Halifax! he's the wu'st critter I ever tackled! He—jest won't keep—ugh!—still."

Frozen with terror, the Prairie Flower watched the terrific struggle, failing to make an effort herself. Once or twice she thought the colonel would get away from the man who clung to him like a leech, but each time he failed just when he seemed on the point of succeeding. She wondered why he did not call for help, but, Danglar seemed to have forgotten that the camp was within reach of his voice. Suddenly she got her lips free from the broad palm which had covered them, and a shrill shriek went echoing through the grove. Almost instantly it was answered.

With a ringing shout, a lithe form came leaping out of the shadows. In a moment she felt herself torn from the grasp of the man who had seized her, and as the wretch went crashing to the ground, a clear, manly voice cried:

"Lie there, you miserable whelp!"

Nida gave a little cry of surprise and joy, for

she recognized the voice of the person who had appeared so opportunely.

It was Prairie Paul, her youthful lover!

CHAPTER III.

A WILD NIGHT'S WORK.

THE Young Prairie Whirlwind, as the youthful hunter and ranger was sometimes called, had appeared in the very nick of time. His strong arm tore the girl from the grasp of the border ruffian, and with one blow straight from the shoulder, he sent the rascal to the earth. Then he thrust the girl behind him, took three strides forward and struck the man who was clinging to Colonel Danglar, the blow sounding like the crack of a whip. With a gurgling groan, the fellow released the ex-officer and staggered back, wildly clutching at the empty air. Then Paul's foot caught him in the pit of the stomach, and he went down like a log and lay gasping in a most painful manner.

Colonel Danglar seemed to have lost his head, for he rushed into the youth's arms and the two came near falling; but, with a swift move, the agile young fellow tripped the excited man and left him lying on the ground, while he hastened to attend to the first man he had struck, who was now rising to his feet.

"Let me help you, pard," laughed the Young Whirlwind, as he caught the man by the wrist and gave a jerk that sent him forward several steps.

Then, before the amazed ruffian could turn, he felt a heavy boot propelled by a muscular leg and was sent forward two or three feet more. He tried to wheel, a gleaming knife in his hand, but once more the boot struck him in the same place, and with a howl of mingled pain and rage, he was lifted off his feet and sent face down in the leaves.

Then Prairie Paul turned and saw Colonel Danglar just getting on his feet, a revolver gleaming in his hand. Quick as a flash the youth jerked out a revolver and covered the colonel, crying sharply:

"Slow and easy there! Do not try to lift your barker, colonel, if you want to continue to wear a whole hide!"

The ex-officer smothered a curse, but made no move to lift the weapon. If there was a person in the world to whom he did not want to be indebted for a friendly turn it was Paul Rickway, the "vagabond," and had not he seen that it would be folly to try to use his revolver while the youth's weapon stared him in the face, he might have done something rash and desperate.

But, at this moment, another actor appeared on the scene. Through the grove came Sam Krick, a revolver in either hand, and not far behind followed several cowboys and Mr. Errol.

"W'at in blue blazes hes bruck loose hyer?" excitedly demanded the old guide, as he came panting to the place where the struggle had occurred. "Ef I didn't hear ther squawk o'er female critter I don't know bullets from butterflies. W'at's ther ruction? Count me in."

Colonel Danglar took it upon himself to reply, and in a few words he explained everything, taking care to give Paul as little credit as possible. With his daughter in his arms, Elias Errol listened to Danglar's story and thanked God that the man's bravery had saved his child from being kidnapped by the two ruffians. The young man who had really saved the girl listened without a word, and the shadows concealed the scornful smile which curled his lip. When the narrator had finished, the old guide looked around in search for the two would-be kidnappers.

"Whar be they?" he roared. "Let Sam Krick git at ther peskyimps o' Satan! Whar are ther varmint o' sin? Ef I git my paws onter 'em, they'll think they're struck by er double-actin' ole ramposin' tornader—ther's w'at they will!"

But, neither of the baffled rascals were to be found. They had improved the opportunity to slip away while the excitement was at its height.

"Now, my friends," said Prairie Paul, when the search was relinquished, "let me advise you to get back to your camp and prepare for trouble."

"Hello, lad," said the guide, thrusting out his crooked hand. "Scuse me fer not speakin' afore, but this year business nigh druv everythin' else out o' my head. I'm jest tarnel glad to grip yer fin. W'at's ther row, anyhow?"

"There is deviltry afoot," answered the youth, as he shook Sam's hand. "This piece of business is only the overture; the rest of the play is to follow."

"Boy, w'at d'yer mean? You speak in riddles."

"I will explain everything when we are in camp, and the sooner we get there the better, for there is no telling when we will all be called on to defend our lives. Is it best that we are in one solid body and ready for hot work?"

"Ding it, Paul! w'at do ye mean?"

But, Paul would not explain till they were all in camp. Nida leaned on her father's arm, while Colonel Danglar walked at the rancher's other elbow, talking in a low tone.

The camp was soon reached, and those who remained near it were found in a state of great excitement and suspense. Mrs. Errol was in a perfect frenzy of excitement and alarm, and when her daughter was restored to her arms, she burst into tears of joy and gratitude.

Standing in the full glow of the fire, Prairie Paul ran his eye over the encampment in a critical manner. He was a tall, frank-faced, manly-appearing youth of twenty, and was dressed in an unusually neat-appearing suit of fringed buckskin, but wore long-legged cowboy boots, minus the high heels. His wide-brimmed sombrero was turned up at one side and fastened with a small pin of silver, representing a clinched hand. Around his waist was a belt of weapons, and a fine Winchester repeater was slung at his back. His face was smooth-shaven, and the dark eyes which peered from beneath the brim of the sombrero were keen and piercing. His long curling hair fell upon his shoulders.

In truth, Prairie Paul looked decidedly picturesque and handsome as he stood in the full glow of the firelight, glancing keenly around at the encampment, and it was not strange that Nida's heart felt a little thrill as she watched him. Perfect grace and strength were blended in his fine figure. He was one of those grand creations of the mountains and plains, a young nobleman of nature.

The youth seemed to take in the situation at one sweeping glance, and a look of satisfaction settled on his face. He turned and shaded his eyes from the firelight to take a look at the river, which formed a half-circle at the back of the camp. The tents had been pitched upon a point of land formed by the curve of the river, and the young man saw that it was in an excellent situation for defense, as the river bounded it in a measure on three sides.

Colonel Danglar seemed very nervous as he stood watching the young plainsman. A smoldering fire burned in the depths of the ex-officer's eyes.

"W'at is it, lad?" the guide again demanded, as he saw the youth taking such a critical survey. "Spit her out afore we all bu'st our b'ilers out o' sheer suspense."

"It is war, old man—war to the knife, and heaps of it! We shall have to defend this camp from Bad Lands Bill and his gang before midnight."

Colonel Delos Danglar uttered a singular exclamation and sprang forward, demanding:

"What kind of nonsense are you trying to get through you, young fellow?"

Paul coolly surveyed the excited man from head to foot, a half-scornful look flashing over his face for an instant; but he replied very quietly:

"I tried to make my words plain enough for every one to understand them. I said that we shall have to defend this camp from the Rustlers of the Bad Lands before midnight. You had better take a look at your weapons, colonel, for we shall need your assistance."

"How d'ye know this, lad?" asked old Sam.

"I have no time to explain now, for the wretches may come down on us any time, and as they have a lot of renegade red-skins with them, you can understand that it will go hard with us if they get the best of the battle. Let everything be made ready for a severe struggle. The moonlight shows me your horses out yon. Have them all brought round upon this point of land back of the camp so that the Rustlers cannot stampede them. Then with picks and spades—for I suppose you have some such implements with you—we will throw up a breastwork there, from behind which we can beat off Bad Lands Bill and his entire posse."

"This is folly!" exclaimed Danglar. "I do not believe in acting like a lot of frightened lunatics just because a boy comes round with such a wild hawk story."

Sam favored the speaker with a very expressive look, as he scornfully observed:

"You know too much ter live, you do!"

"Hey, thar, Rube! Looker live, now! Thar's blood on ther moon! Hev ther hosses brought roun' outer ther lan' back o' ther tents, an' be derved lively erbout it. Take hafe o' ther boys; I want ther others."

"Mr. Errol, you look arter ther wimmen gen-

der an' see w'at kin be done ter fix 'em er safe place frum flyin' bullets inside one o' ther tents. Thar's apt ter be er holy hot time roun' hyer afore shortly."

"Skywood, whar's them picks an' spades? Jest trot 'em out, an' we'll hev er fortyfashun hyer thet'll putt ter blush ther breastworks o' ole Bunker Hill. Everybuddy git ter movin' an' see thet ye're doin' suthin' as you'd orter be."

And in less time than seemed possible the clear-headed old guide had the entire party at work preparing for a battle. No, not quite the entire party, for Colonel Danglar stood watching every movement, a black scowl on his face. He took no part in the busy bustle.

Sam's orders were promptly obeyed, and it was not long before the horses were in a place of comparative safety. Meantime, some of the cowboys had been working like beavers with the picks and spades, and a bank of earth was being thrown up at the very edge of the grove, two rods from the tents. Prairie Paul had taken care to extinguish the fire, as it did no good to assist the workmen, and it might serve as a signal to guide their enemies to the spot.

To and fro strode Colonel Danglar, watching the proceedings. He still appeared nervous, and it was not strange that, being so excited, he should wander from the limits of the camp. As it was, he ran into one of the cowboys, who said:

"You'd best go back, sir, fer I can't let ye go no fuder this way. Sam hes putt me hyer ter see thet ther didn't none o' ther folks git too fur away. Ther Rustlers are apt ter drap down outer us enny time."

The colonel hesitated, and then wheeled and walked back into the camp. Whatever Danglar's object was, he was not able to carry it out before the attack came. The men had prepared quite a breastwork when the thud of horses' hoofs came to their ears, and the moonlight showed then a dark body of horsemen breaking from a grove some distance down the river.

"Hyar ther hellyons cum!" cried Sam Krick. "Down picks an' spades an' up rifles! Every galoot git red dy ter guv 'em a taste o' fire an' brimstan! Good Lawd! ef only Old Nick Rickway wuz hyer now, how he w'd enjoy it! Wait tell I guv ther word ter fire, then let 'em have."

Colonel Danglar still appeared to be strangely excited for an old army officer who had participated in many a desperate battle, for he fired a shot long before the horsemen were within good range for moonlight shooting. The answer was one wild yell that seemed to fairly cut the night air, and the attacking party came down on the encampment like a whirlwind.

"Steady, men," came quietly from Prairie Paul's lips. "Wait for Sam to give the word."

The white moonlight gleamed on the rifle-barrels which lay along the top of the bank of earth that had been so hastily thrown up. In a moment those terrible weapons would belch forth fire and smoke, and would send a leaden hail of death into the ranks of the charging desperadoes.

"Reddy!" hissed the old guide. "Now, one, two, three, fire!"

At the word a terrible volley rung out, and over the plain and through the groves rolled the sounds which told that the battle was begun. In one tent Mrs. Errol and Nida cowered and listened, while Mrs. Skywood and a companion crouched in another. The wild yells of the amazed outlaws were answered by a cheer from the defenders of the camp. The sound of the shots became rattling and uneven, and the smoke of battle settled down over the terrible scene.

"Give 'em er taste o' Hail Columby!" belled old Sam, the guide. "Singe ther mugs with fire an' fill ther systems with good old-fashioned bullets! Oh, heavings! Why didn't Ole Nick Rickway live ter see this day?"

The yells of the white outlaws and their red companions were fearful to hear. Right up to the bank of earth the desperate bandits, who had thought to take the party by surprise but had been surprised themselves, urged their horses, and in the smoke of battle they loomed up before the defenders like mighty giants. Many an outlaw or red-skin reached the bank and seemed on the point of leaping his horse into the little party of Spartan-like heroes behind it, only to fling up their hands in the murky smoke and fall headlong to the earth. The smoke seemed to be shutting out the moonlight, but the flashes of rifles and revolvers lit up the faces of the struggling men with fitful, uncertain glares, revealing the look

of sullen determination that marked the countenances of the defenders of the camp.

Suddenly the heavy booming report of a rifle sounded close at hand, and then, in the very midst of the outlaws, striking terrible blows on every hand, a large man appeared, mounted on a coal-black horse. Like a Trojan giant he smote right and left amid the sulphurous smoke, sending down the outlaws beneath his heavy blows, and carrying terror and dismay wherever he went. The white ruffians and the red-skins fled before the strange man wherever he turned. The defenders of the camp hailed the appearance of the unknown with shouts of joy.

Suddenly a shrill, piercing whistle rung out somewhere in the midst of the camp, and, as if it had been a signal, the attacking mob wheeled and fled over the plain. Then the unknown who had contributed so much to aid in defeating the Bad Lands wretches leaped his magnificent black horse over the bank of earth, and the defenders of the camp surrounded him with a cheer. Silently the cloud of smoke rolled away, and the clear moonlight fell upon the little group of blood-stained and smoke-begrimed men. As the light fell upon the face of their unknown friend, the old guide started forward, exclaiming:

"Great Jonah! it's Wild Vulcan!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE DEAD ALIVE—GONE!

WILD VULCAN! A character well known at one time in Nebraska and Dakota; a strange, gloomy-appearing man of mystery, the friend of every honest person, the deadly foe of outlaws and hostile Indians. Involuntarily, with a feeling of awe, the cowboys shrunk away from the man sitting so silently in their midst. They had heard many strange tales of the prowess of the wild man whom the red-skins called the Great Thunder. It was said that single-handed he had often attacked and destroyed a dozen of the hostile reds, by whom he was greatly feared.

The moonlight revealed a large, dark-skinned man, whose long, black hair fell upon his shoulders and the lower part of whose face was covered by a heavy beard. The upper half of his face was shadowed by the wide brim of the hat which he wore. He was dressed in buckskin that had evidently seen rough service, for it was well worn. The heavy rifle which had with a deep, booming report announced his advent upon the field of battle was slung at his back. A belt supporting weapons encircled his waist, and in his right hand he held a heavy hatchet with which he had dealt such terrible and telling blows.

A moment the Lone Rider sat looking around the saved camp, and there was something awe-inspiring in his manner. Finally he pushed the wide-brimmed hat back upon his head, and a pair of piercing eyes seemed suddenly to gleam out upon those near him. In a deep, thrilling voice he said:

"Well, my friends, you succeeded in beating the devils off."

"With your aid," impulsively exclaimed Mr. Errol, advancing with extended hand, which the other instantly grasped.

"I may have helped you some," admitted the mysterious ranger. "I was trailing the imps, and heard the sound of the battle when not far away. I instantly surmised that the wretches had attacked some kind of a party, and reasoned that their enemies must be my friends, so I hastened to take a hand."

"And right royally you served us," asserted the rancher. "Your name—"

"Men call me Wild Vulcan, and I am satisfied with the title."

"Then," said Mr. Errol, "I propose three cheers for Wild Vulcan."

They were given with a will, for the cowboys admired the singular man of the plains, although it was said that he was more than half-insane. He acknowledged the tribute in a graceful manner by removing his hat and bowing in a dignified way, saying simply:

"I thank you, my friends."

"An' now," said the old guide, "let's see who's passed in their checks an' who's hurt."

An investigation showed that two of the cowboys had been killed, and several were more or less severely wounded. A fire was soon built and the wounded cared for.

"Next thing," observed Sam, as he pointed to several figures which lay inside of the embankment, "we'd better move them corpses an' fine out which o' 'em's our frien's an' which is o' ther gang as tried rer ketch us by s'prise an' whooper to us."

"What shall we do with these dead red-skins and outlaws?" asked Riata Rube, when the two

cowboys had been removed to a spot near the fire and covered with blankets.

"Jest sack 'em outside," replied Sam. "Ef their pards don't take keer o' them ther wolves will. I reckon their frien's will bury 'em arter we move erway in ther mornin'."

The guide was on hand to help remove the bodies.

"We dun 'em up in great shape, lads," he declared; "but I reckon it 'u'd bin a harder job ef that thar Wild Vulcan hadn't chipped in. Thet critter's er tornader on wheels. It wuz a gran' fight, but it didn't mount ter northin' side o' one I an' Ole Nick Rickway wuz in once, God rest his soul! Ole Nick wuz the biggest Injun-fighter what I never sot my peepers on. Ther red varmints wuz allus skeered ter death o' him, an' they called him White Lightnin'. One time jest even three hundred o' ther pesky critters got I an' Ole Nick penned up in er pocket an' we stood ther hull gang off fer three days. Then our pervisuns played out an' we had ter do suthin'. I didn't know w'at ter do, but Nick did, you bet. He jest tole me ter load up every weppin an' foller him. I dun it, an' blame my skin ef he didn't lead me rite out inter ther hull pot an' b'illin' o' ther red imps. Then he sez, sez he: 'Guv ther copper-skins glory ter Gideon, Samuel!'—He allus called me Samuel, Nick did.—An' with thet, we opened up on ther heathen. Ther way we cut an' slashed an' yelled an' whooped an' danced an' made ther fur fly w'u'd 'a' frightened ther Ole Boy hisself ef he'd bin thar. Ther reds seemed smitten with a sudden attack o' inactivity an' they jest stood roun' an' let us mow 'em down. Ole Nick he seemed tooken with er demon, fer he waded in with er knife in one han' an' a tomyhawk in ther other, an' his arms wuz red with gore clean ter ther shoulders. Arter I had killed erbout fifty I got tired an' sot down ter rest an' rekooperate; but Nick never stopped. He kept right on slashin' tell he had killed every blamed red varmint. Then, ez he wiped ther blood out o' his eyes, he drew er long sigh o' relief an' obsarved that ther job might be rather tiresome, but he'd like ter take er kontrac' ter serve ther hull Injun Nashun in ther same way. Ther red-headed serpent! You fellers may think thet's er trifle overdrawn, but I o'u'd prove it ef Ole Nick Rickway wuz alive."

At this point one of the supposed-to-be dead outlaws sat up and solemnly observed:

"Thet's ernuff ter bring ther dead ter life! It's er blamed lie, an' Samuel Krick's er deceivin' ole fraud!"

In his amazement, the guide came near falling over backward. He gave a yell of horror and held out both hands as if to ward off an unwelcome apparition.

"Holy Moses an' ther prophets!" he yelled, his eyes fairly bulging from ther sockets. "I take it all back an' acknowledge I lied. Thunder an' Mars! I never thort ther tellin' o' sich er story 'bout my ole pard 'u'd bring his spirrit down onter me!"

At this the man who had apparently risen from the dead broke into a chuckling, jolly laugh that shook his whole body and made the mouth in his beardless face look like a hole in a squash—and a big hole for the size of the vegetable.

"Ho! ho! ho! Ha! ha! ha! Huah! huah!" he laughed. "This year's too good fer anythin'! Pears like I never wuz quite ser teekled! I caught ther ole truth-twistin' extract o' deceit in one o' his most condemnable impositions on ther pure an' unadulterated facts. Sam-u-el, w'at d'yer 'spect's goin' ter becum o' ye w'en ye hev ter turn toes up ter ther daises?"

Sam's knees fairly knocked together with terror.

"N-n-n-nick," he stuttered, holding out his hands appealingly, "don't you b-b-be too hard on yer ole p-p-pard! I s'pose ther Old B-b-b-boy'll git me, but I hope you'll ax him ter let me off ez long's p-p-p-possible."

At this, the one addressed went into another convulsion of rollicking laughter, clinging to his sides and finishing with a queer little whoop of a cough.

"Oh, dear me! oh, dear me!" he gasped. "I'm afraid this will be the death of me! Why, Sam-u-el, d'yer raderly take me fer er ghost? Ef so, ye're 'way off, fer I am very mucherlive, ez you'll be shore ter diskiver if ye're partwickerler ernuff ter 'zamine me. I'm ther same Ole Nick Rickway w'at ye wuz lyin' 'bout in er beastly manner er few moments ergo. Cum grip my fin."

Still Sam seemed to doubt, for he hesitated about approaching the tall, slim, angular old fellow who had arisen to his feet and stood with arms akimbo, neck craned forward and mouth

stretched in a grin that made his round, funny-looking face look like a comic illustration of the "man in the moon." He had a bullet-like head that looked queer upon such a long neck, and his round, jolly-appearing face contrasted singularly with his long, angular body.

As soon as the startled and amazed guide was near enough, the strange-looking individual sprung forward and wound his long arms around old Sam, still laughing as he cried:

"Glory ter Gideon, ole boy! It duz me good ter git holt o' ye erg'in, you leetle double-barreled runt o' er liar! I'd jest like ter squeeze ye till ye squealed. Whoop-ee!"

"It's him!" yelled Sam, with a whoop of delight—"it's him erlive! B'gosh I kin feel him! Hain't no ghost erbout this! W'y, Nick, you ole darlin'! this year's too good ter be true!"

As the guide was a small man, and his friend was an unusually tall person, being at least six feet and two inches, they presented a peculiar spectacle as, locked in each other's arms, they waltzed over the ground in a delirium of delight, and, with one exception, the spectators burst into laughter. That exception was Colonel Delos Danglar, who had been standing with folded arms, watching all that passed.

"We wuz shore thet you wuz dead, Nick," panted Sam, when they had ceased their gyrations and stood with clasped hands. "They sed er blamed two-faced red-skin had captured yer skulp."

"Thet wuz er mistook," was the reply. "My skulp still kivers ther roof o' my cabeza."

"But," said Sam, suddenly releasing the other's hand and stepping away a pace, "jest explain how ye kem ter be with thet derved gang o' lan' pirates. Hev ye turned outlaw, Nick Rickway?"

The tall man laughed.

"I hed ter fer a time," he admitted. "They caught me in er tight corner, an' 'twuz either turn outlaw or go over ther Dead Range. I chose ter turn outlaw fer er time an' watch my chance ter git erway. Hain't never hed no chance ter skoot tell ter-night, an' w'en I wuz forced ter take er han' in ther charge on this year fortyficashun, I kinder concluded thet Ole Nick Rickway wuz booked fer ther happy huntin' groun's. Them behind jest forced me rite up ter ther breastworks, but w'en my hoss wuz shot, I diskivered er chance ter flop down inside ther bank, an' you may bet I dun it lively like. I'm cl'ar o' thet gang o' hoss-lifters an' cattle-purloiners, an' w'en they git their han's onter me erg'in they'll know it."

Barely had Old Nick finished his explanation when there came a loud cry of anguish from one of the tents. An instant rush was made toward it, and Mr. Errol was found bending over his wife, who lay on the ground, either dead or in a swoon.

"W'at is it?" demanded Sam Krick.

"My child—my child!" cried the rancher, wringing his hands in anguish. "She is gone—gone!"

CHAPTER V.

A TRAITOR IN CAMP.

THE rancher's declaration that his daughter was gone created great consternation among those who heard it. An instant search was made for the girl, but she was not found in the camp and no one seemed to have seen her since the battle.

In the mean time, Mrs. Errol had been restored to consciousness, for it was found that she was not dead but in a faint; but at first she was too dazed to make any explanation. After a time, however, she called for Nida. Then in a moment she remembered what had happened, and she started up, calling:

"Nida, Nida! Where is she? Have they carried her away, the cruel men?"

The rancher did what he could to calm her, and after a time she said that, during the battle, three men who wore masks, suddenly sprung into the tent and seized her and Nida, throwing cloths over their heads to prevent an outcry. She had made a desperate struggle, but had finally been overcome with faintness and smothered into insensibility.

The strange man who had given his name as Wild Vulcan stood in the opening of the tent and heard the poor woman's story. A hard look settled on his face and he glanced keenly at those around him.

"Friends," said he, in a tone that drew the attention of all, "I believe there is a traitor in this camp."

This declaration created no small amount of amazement and consternation.

"Er traitor?" cried the guide. "W'at mecks ye think so?"

"I believe that the girl could not have been successfully and silently kidnapped without assistance from some one who knew all about the interior of the camp. It is plain that the rascals knew just where she was, and they timed their movements finely so that they did their dastardly work at the moment when the battle was raging the fiercest."

"By Jonah! I believe ye're right!"

"I feel sure that I am; but, that is not all. Perhaps some of you noticed that at the very moment when the battle was raging the fiercest a shrill whistle sounded apparently within the limits of this very camp?"

Several quickly asserted that they had heard it.

"That," said the Lone Ranger, "was a signal, for as soon as the outlaws heard it, they gave up the fight and retreated. I believe that it was a signal that the black work of kidnapping this gentleman's daughter had been successfully carried out, and, seeing that the attack would finally result in defeat, the whistle sounded the signal for retreat."

"Thet's it! thet's it!" cried Sam, slapping his thigh. "You hev got a tarnal clear head on you, Pard Vulcan."

The others agreed with the guide, but were at a loss to surmise who the traitor could be. Finally, some one asked:

"Where is that young fellow who came into camp just before the fight and warned us that the Rustlers were coming?"

A close search failed to discover Prairie Paul. Old Nick joined in the search, for he was anxious to see the lad whom he had rescued from the reds many years before, but from whom he had been entirely parted for more than a year. Finally the hunt was given up and Riata Rube reported that the youth could not be found.

Then Colonel Danglar came to the front.

"This thing begins to look very clear to me," he asserted.

He was instantly surrounded by those who were eager to hear what he had to say.

"The trick was worked very shrewdly, but it is plain how it was carried out successfully. You will all remember that the crafty young scamp who appeared and pretended to aid me in overpowering the two ruffians who attacked Miss Nida a short time before the battle—you must remember that he pretended to have a knowledge of an impending attack upon this camp, yet refused to explain how he came to know so much. The attack came, but it was evidently for the purpose of attracting our attention while the young lady was kidnapped. As soon as she had been carried out of the camp, the outlaws fell back and gave up the siege. Then we find that with Miss Nida the crafty youth has also disappeared. What are we to think?"

A murmur ran over the listeners, then Old Nick Rickway stepped forward and confronted Delos Danglar, his usually jolly-appearing face being hard-set, and the merry twinkle of his eyes being replaced by an angry flush.

"Sir," he said coldly, gazing straight at the colonel, "ef you mean ter 'cuse ennybuddy o' double-dealin', will you be kind ernuff ter be jest er little more partwickerler in your statements? Jest fire off yer gun ef it's loaded, an' not keep snappin' ther lock ez if ye didn't hafe durst ter do it. W'at d'yer mean, anyway? Spit et out."

"I mean that, if there was a traitor in this camp, *Prairie Paul is the traitor!*"

Deliberately Old Nick began to remove his well-worn coat.

"W'at are you goin' ter do, Nick?" asked the little guide.

"Lick thet cussid liar!" was the calm reply.

"Stand off!" cried Danglar, jerking out a revolver and cocking it with an ominous double click. "If you take one step toward me, I will throw you cold, you impudent, long-legged shadow!"

It looked as if there would be serious trouble, but Sam Krick stepped between the two men, a revolver in either hand.

"Chain up byer!" he commanded, sternly. "Ther fu'st ter meck er move er burn powder gits er dose out o' these pill-dispensers. You hear me! We want ter git at ther bottom o' this crooked business. We want ter know jest who ther traitor is."

"Oh, come now, Samuel!" protested the tall ranger, pausing with his coat half-removed; "jest let yer ole pard git at that insinowatin' varmint an' give him partwickerler fits. Ther beastly skunk, ter call my boy—my Paul, ez white er lad ez ever drored breath—ter call him er traitor! Jest let me pulverize ther truth-distortin' son' o' er gun!"

"Let him come if he wants to so bad," coolly nodded Colonel Danglar. "I will drop him the first jump he makes."

"Thar hain't goin' ter be no trouble tell we git at ther truth, I tell yer!" snapped the little guide. "You hev seen fit ter call Prairie Paul er traitor, Mister Danglediddle; now we want ye ter prove it."

"His absence at this moment is proof enough."

"Thet's mighty slim proof," sneered Old Nick.

"It is stout enough to satisfy my friends. As for you, Sir Longlegs, I reckon we all know how you came in this camp. You told a mighty fine story about how you came to be with the outlaws, but really, it won't wash. It will aid the cute youngster very little that you proclaim his honesty. In fact, it looks decidedly black for you both. I more than half-believe that you worked this contemptible job together."

An ominous murmur ran over the throng of cowboys, and it was plain to see that the ex-officer's words had produced a deep impression. Danglar was quick to take advantage of this.

"Friends," he cried, "have a care that the guilty one does not escape. Such work deserves a rope and the limb of a tree."

The murmur from the cowboys became louder and louder, hands were laid upon convenient weapons and the brawny fellows scowled darkly at Old Nick. For the first time, Sam Krick began to look alarmed. He whirled sharply toward the growling men, crying:

"Slow an' easy, pard! You know me, an' I know Ole Nick Rickway. I'll sw'ar thet he is wite all ther way through. Don't go ter showin' yer teeth at the wrong bone. Take time an' we'll git hold o' the right pussen."

"Reckon we've got him now," said one of the cowboys in the rear of the group. "We don't want no outlaws in ourn."

The murmur grew still louder till oaths and curses were plainly heard and the little guide saw that there would surely be an outbreak. He was close beside his tall pard, and, without turning his head, he said in a tone that only Nick heard:

"You'll hev ter skoot, ole man. Ther road ter ther river's open an' under ther bushes thet hang over ther watter rite straight down frum hyer you'll fine er canoe. Tell 'em thet you are goin' ter bring back ther gal, an' keep yer word ef ye kin."

Old Nick hesitated several moments, but Sam hissed: "Go, go!" Then the strange, tall man quelled a rising murmur as he turned half-savagely on the cowboys, crying:

"You kin believe thet lyin' critter ef ye want ter, but you'll fine out some day thet he's wrong. Reckon ye'd like ter stretch this year swan-like neck o' mine, but ye won't hev er chance ter-nite. I'm mighty partwickerler 'bout my neck. Now I'm goin' ter fine thet gal an' resky her."

Then he sprung away toward the river. Colonel Danglar uttered an oath and threw up his revolver; but Sam was watching, and he thrust up Danglar's arm just as the weapon spoke, causing the bullet to whistle through the trees far above the fleeing man's head.

"Don't let him escape!" cried the baffled colonel. "After him!"

Like hounds upon a trail they sprung away, failing to heed Mr. Errol, who, up to this point, had seemed dazed but was now calling after them. But they failed to catch the tall borderman before he reached the water, and when they reached the river-bank, it was only to hear the dip of a paddle and see a dark bulk moving through the shadows toward the open moonlight beyond. Back over the water floated the jolly laugh of the strange old fellow in the canoe, and in a rather pleasant voice he sung:

"Oh! we mus' part, but not ferever,
Fer I mus' skip jest now or never,
An don't let ther partin' grieve you."

"Well," observed Riata Rube, "that is what I call coolness. I swear I admire that old rascal's nerve!"

"Hold on!" cried Mr. Errol, as he came panting to the spot; "hold on! Don't harm Old Nick Rickway! I know him well, and I will stake my life on his squareness."

Just then the canoe shot out into the moonlight and the tall old borderman arose to his feet and waved his paddle toward the shore in a sort of farewell salute. At that very instant a rifle cracked not far away, and, with a piercing cry of agony, the man in the canoe dropped the paddle into the water, swayed a moment, then plunged headlong into the river.

CHAPTER VI.

FROM MIDNIGHT TILL MORNING.

"GREAT JONAH!" gasped Sam Krick.

"My God!" cried the rancher. "Some fiend has shot Old Nick!"

The spectators to this little tragedy were greatly excited, and in great suspense they watched the water, hoping to see the strange man rise to the surface. But the silvery surface of the river was unmarred and the canoe floated away at the will of the breeze and current.

"He's gone this time, shore!" groaned the guide. "Poor Ole Nick! My ole pard! He wuz ez white er man ez ever drored breath or skulped er red varmint!" with sudden fierceness: "an' I'll shoot ther fu'st dirty cuss ez dares ter say er word erg'in' him!"

"Who fired that shot?" asked the chief of the River Ranch cowboys.

The question was unanswered.

"Some sneakin' assassin!" cried Sam. "He is hid in ther timber not fur erway. Scatter an' s'arch fer him."

"Yes, hunt him down," commanded Mr. Errol, "for if ever a noble man was murdered in a dastardly manner, it was Old Nick Rickway."

In a moment the men sprung away to scour the shore, and the hidden assassin would have received short shrift if he had been discovered; but he was evidently as clever as he was murderous, for not a trace of him was found. When the fruitless search was abandoned, the men gathered in the camp around Mr. Errol and the strange plainsman, Wild Vulcan.

"What next?" asked Riata Rube, and every one turned toward the unfortunate ranchman whose daughter had been kidnapped while they were defending the camp.

"I do not know," was the sad reply, as the unfortunate father turned his eyes upon the magnificent man at his side. "Cannot you advise us, Vulcan?"

"To me there seems but one thing to do," slowly said the ranger. "You cannot trail the kidnappers to-night, therefore you must wait for morning. I have heard of Sam Krick, and report says that he is as good a trailer as guide. To-morrow you can take the trail and follow it like hounds."

"It seems impossible for me to wait for daylight," half-groaned the distracted parent.

"Nothing else can be done," declared Wild Vulcan, pityingly. "Oh, man, man! I know only too well how you feel! For fourteen years have I been upon the trail of that wretch who is now called Bad Lands Bill, but who was once Missouri Marl, the Marauder. In one bitter black night he tore from me all that I held dear in life. Look! and the strange man turned so that the firelight fell upon a great scar upon one cheek; "there is where a bullet from the pistol of the Border Scourge marked me for life as I defended my home and my loved ones. I could show other marks on my body. They left me for dead; but I came to life, and as true as there is a God in Heaven, I will yet hunt Missouri Marl to his death! At times when I have been hot upon his trail—when I have known that he was but a short distance away—and darkness has shut out the marks that guided me, I have wept and raved like a madman. It is a wonder that I am not mad! I have spent many nights raving, cursing, praying—praying for light! I have endured the tortures of a lost soul. But, my day is coming. Then, helpless as a child, the wretch I am after shall rest beneath my hand. Then he shall tell me where my little one is—and die!"

The cowboys listened, spell-bound, awe-stricken. The fierce light which burned in the speaker's eyes and his singular manner of speech seemed to explain why he had been called Wild Vulcan, for at that moment he did almost appear like a madman. Involuntarily those nearest moved further away, and among them was Colonel Danglar, whose eyes gleamed with a singular look and whose face was as white as that of a corpse. Not a man spoke.

Suddenly the strange man buried his face in his hands for a moment, then lifted it with an outflinging of his arms, as if throwing off a heavy load.

"I must go," he said, quietly; "I cannot remain quiet longer. Before I depart I would like to speak to your wife, Mr. Errol."

"All right, sir," said the ranchman. "Follow me."

A moment later both men disappeared within the tent where Mrs. Errol lay, not having fully recovered from the terrible shock she had received. When the canvas hid them from view, Sam Krick drew a long breath and observed:

"Consarned ef I w'u'dn't hate like sin ter hev him after me like he is arter Bad Lan's William. I think I'd go kermite susan-side by cuttin' my

throat with ther sharp edge o'er bed-qu.

Uncle Josh once remarked."

"He is a singular man," said Riata Rube.

"Does any one know more of his history than the vague glimpse he gave us just now?"

"I've heerd tell ez how y'ars ergo he tuck up er claim sumwhar this side o' ther Mississippi," replied the guide. "He built er little hut on it, an' his wife an' chile, er wee toddler, kem onter ther claim with him. I dunno whether ther kid wuz er boy or er gal, but it is sed thet Vulcan St. Clair, fer thet is his true name, thought more o' his pritty wife an' ther young 'un then he did o' all ther rest o' ther worl'. One night er gang o' border ruffians kam down on him an' tuck him by s'prise. He fit like er tiger, an' saw his wife shot dead afore his eyes. Arter er while he fell to ther floor, an' ther bloody-handed wretches thort he wuz dead. Hours later he kem to an' foun' hisself layin' on ther cabin-floor aside his dead wife. Ther outlaws wuz gone, an' so wuz his child. He burried his wife, an' over her grave he tuck an' awful oath ter hunt ther murderers down an' rekyer his child. Thet wuz fourteen y'ars ergo. He has bin on ther trail ever since, an' now he says thet Bad Lan's Bill is ther cuss w'at he is arter. Thet means woe fer William."

A few minutes later Mr. Errol and the vengeful trailer issued from the tent. Wild Vulcan walked straight to where his horse was standing.

"I have promised your wife to help you find her lost daughter, and I shall keep my word," he said, as he grasped the ranchman's hand a moment ere mounting. "Keep a good heart, my friend, and do what you can to cheer the poor lady. You shall hear from me again soon. Farewell for the present."

Then he sprung upon the back of the magnificent black horse to gallop from the grove, and go dashing through the moonlight that hung like a silver mist over the prairie. Many of the party went to the edge of the grove and watched the dark form of horse and rider as they grew smaller and fainter with the increasing distance, till white shimmering light seemed to close over them like a gauzy veil and hide them from view.

Listen!

From far out over the plain came the booming, cannon-like report of a heavy rifle, followed by wild, savage yells. Wild Vulcan had met foes!

"He's good fer er dozen!" nodded Sam Krick; "an' ef that's too menny fer him, northin' but chain-lightnin' kin ketch thet hoss o' his."

Colonel Danglar listened eagerly, appearing strangely nervous and excited.

The wild yells still continued, and the listening men heard a faint rumble of hoofs away in the distance; but, slowly, the sounds grew more and more indistinct, till at last they died out far, far away.

"Well," observed Riata Rube, "we have had excitement enough for one night."

"An' it may not be over," said the guide. "Ennyhow, sum o' us hez got ter keep guard hyer all night, ter keep ther wolves from them carcasses, an' ter watch out fer ernuther visit frum ther party as called erwhile ergo, though it hain't noways likely they will come roun' erg'in ter-nite."

"Looker thar!"

The cry came from one of the cowboys, and he was pointing toward the open plain. Every one looked in the direction indicated, and exclamations of surprise came from many.

Some distance away a milk-white horse was moving along at a slow gallop and upon its back was a feminine figure dressed in snowy white. The hoofs of the ghostly steed seemed to give forth no sound. A low wail, that sounded like the cry of a person who is lost and almost exhausted came floating over the plain.

"The White Spirit!" exclaimed several, and a hush of fear fell upon the party.

On, on, till swallowed up by the misty light went the phantom-like steed and rider. Every one drew a breath of relief when it had vanished.

Not many slept in the sportsmen's camp that night. The recent events furnished food for discussion, and little groups gathered to talk it all over. A number of wolves howled dismally beyond the line where some of the men kept guard over the bodies of the dead bandits and their horses. Slowly the moon crept down the western sky and the night grew older.

When the first gray light of morning showed in the east the entire camp was astir. There was work before them. Their dead comrades were to be buried, and some of them were to take up the trail of the kidnappers.

was a great surprise when Wild Vulcan rode slowly into the grove and sprang from the back of his foam-flecked steed. He was greeted with a shout and many gathered around him, Mr. Errol among them.

"Sir," said the strange man, as he once more grasped the ranchman's hand, "I was unable to rescue your daughter, but I know where they have taken her. The whole party of marauders are moving into the Bad Lands, and she has been carried there without a doubt."

"My God!" groaned Mr. Errol; "then I fear she is lost to us forever!"

CHAPTER VII.

DEATH IN THE RIVER.

NIDA'S captors carried her away by the river while her father was assisting the others to beat off the outlaws at the edge of the grove. With a canoe they had stolen into camp and silently performed their detestable work. While one of the rascals held the girl—there were only two who left the grove, despite Mrs. Errol's assertion that three men entered the tent—the other plied the paddle, driving the canoe up the river. They stole along in the shadows and made rapid headway, for the man with the paddle seemed to be an expert in handling such an implement. Nida was nearly smothered beneath the blanket with which her head was covered, but she managed to get enough air to keep from losing consciousness. When they were safely beyond earshot of the camp the blanket was removed and the poor girl was allowed to breathe the pure fresh air once more.

"Now, my pritty," observed the man who held her, "you hed jest better keep rite still an' not make enny trouble, fer if ye do kick up er rumpus, it won't do one bit o' good. Ef you sh'd holler yerself hoarse, you c'dn't make yer frien's hear, fer we are plum' out o' hearin' distance. I reckon you've good sense enough ter take things easy."

At first the poor girl said nothing, but, after a time, she asked:

"Where are you taking me?"

"Hol ho!" laughed the man who had spoken before. "So ye're growin' inquisitive, are ye, leetle'un? Whar are we a-takin' of ye? Wal, I reckon ye'll find out by 'n' by."

"Wretches!" cried the maiden, with infinite scorn, "you shall pay dearly for this night's work!"

At this both men laughed, and the one with the paddle observed with evident satisfaction:

"I calculate we will be paid well for it."

"I suppose by that you mean to hold me for ransom?"

"We do not mean to hold you for anything; it is the chief who wants you. He is the one who will pay us for w at we have done, though he helped us work the game successfully. I do not believe that he means to hold the Prairie Flower for ransom, but I fancy he is looking for a wife and she has pleased his eye."

Nida shuddered.

"The miserable wretch!" she flashed. "I will never, never become his wife!"

"That is very easily said, but you will be in his power, and so I do not see how you are going to help yourself."

"I will find a way," was the spirited reply.

The men laughed again, and the one with the paddle declared:

"I swear I admire your pluck, little one. I do not wonder that the captain was dead gone. You are as pretty as a flower, but as spirited as a wildcat. The boss will have to clip your claws or he will get scratched."

"I do not ask for your admiration," said Nida, very quietly. "The admiration of such wretches is not to be courted."

"That settles me," nodded the man in the stern, as he relapsed into silence and fell to plying the paddle with renewed vigor.

Hanging in close to the shore, partly to keep in the shadows and partly to avoid the current, they continued onward till they were four or five miles further up the river. Finally, the one who held Nida observed:

"This year's ther place, Jack."

Then the prow of the canoe was turned toward the shore, and a few moments later they had landed.

"You hide ther boat, Jack," said the fellow who still clung to Nida's arm. "I'll look arter ther gal."

Then he led the fair captive away to a little glade into which the bright moonlight was streaming.

"We will stop hyer fer er while, my pritty," he asserted with a chuckle. "This is er rayther pritty spot an' you kin amoose yerself by watchin' ther moonlight. Reckon I'll hev er smoke."

He compelled her to sit down upon the ground, and he threw himself down within two feet of her, getting out a cob pipe and proceeding to fill it from a huge square of black tobacco.

"Ye see I'm r'al 'tickler 'bout yer comfut," he said, as he lighted the pipe. "I tuck keer to git on this side so ther wind w'd blow ther smook rite erway frum ye."

Nida said nothing, but she was watching him closely. He did not appear to be watching her very closely, and she wondered if she could not spring to her feet and dash away into the bushes which grew near by. She glanced around and discovered that she could see the river near at hand through a little opening that led out of the glade. The moonlight fell in a silver flood upon its broad bosom. It would not do to flee that way, for the water would cut her off. No, she must plunge directly into the shadows and trust to fortune. She drew her feet well under her and prepared for the spring. The man smoked on without paying the least attention to her move.

"Now, Heaven help me!" thought the desperate girl.

Then like a flash she leaped to her feet and bounded away straight toward the thickest of the bushes. Every second she expected to feel the hand of the man with the pipe fall upon her shoulder, but nothing of the kind occurred. Instead, she ran straight into the arms of the other one of her captors, who suddenly emerged from the shadows directly ahead of her.

"Ah!" he laughed. "Really it cannot be that you are going so soon! And why such a hurry?"

"Bring her back, Jackson," said the man with the pipe.

Then Nida observed that he had not even arisen to his feet, but was smoking as serenely as if nothing had happened. That very discovery did more to crush her spirit than anything else, for it seemed as if everything even to her attempted escape had been carefully planned and calculated upon. She offered no resistance as Jackson led her back, neither did she burst into tears, as some girls would have done under similar circumstances.

"I think you had better stop a while longer," mockingly said the fellow who had prevented her flight. "We are charmed with your company and would like to have you remain as long as possible. It is not often that we have such a charming companion."

Once more she was compelled to sit upon the ground, this time directly between the two men.

"We hain't goin' ter truss ye up, pritty," nodded the one with the pipe. "I reckon we can take keer o' ye without doin' thet, an' we wants ter use ye ez well ez possible."

Nida made no reply, but she resolved to keep her eyes open, for she might yet find a chance to give them the slip.

The two ruffians seemed to be waiting to be joined by others, and they were somewhat impatient at the delay of their comrades. Jack reported that he had taken a survey, but had seen nothing of them. For some time they conversed, occasionally starting up to listen.

"Curse it, Tom!" Jack finally exclaimed. "Where can they be?"

"Don't ax me!" snapped the one addressed, pulling savagely at the pipe. "They orter 'a' bin hyer er-waitin' fer us, fer thar hain't no tellin' but some o' ther gal's folks may git arter us."

Those words gave the girl a thrill of hope. Then a sudden rustling was heard in the bushes not far away. Both of Nida's captors wheeled in that direction, with their hands upon their revolvers. At the same instant a dark figure glided out of the shadows behind them, and reached Nida's side, quickly lifting her upon her feet. She gave an involuntary cry of surprise, and the figure leaped swiftly to one side, flashing out two revolvers and crying sharply:

"Hands up, you human brutes, or I will perforate you both!"

The moonlight revealed the handsome figure of Prairie Paul, the Young Whirlwind!

Nida gave a cry of delight, and the amazed and dismayed ruffians uttered oaths of consternation.

"Hands up, or die!" repeated Paul.

But at this moment Nida saw another form spring out behind the youth, and with a hysterical scream she cried:

"Look out, Paul! there is an Indian behind you!"

Quick as a flash the young plainsman whirled, and just in time to prevent a tomahawk from crashing into his brain. Then the red-skin sprang upon him, and they grappled in a deadly

struggle. Nida's two captors sprang to their feet and advanced to help their red ally, but so swiftly whirled the struggling figures that they could not do a thing but watch the fight. Within her heart Nida was praying that the life of her brave young lover might be spared.

Here and there over the little glade went the struggling figures, their heavy breathing alone being sufficient to tell how savagely they were fighting. Gradually they moved nearer and nearer the river, the girl and her captors following. Once or twice it seemed that the savage had the white youth conquered, but each time Paul managed to overcome the advantage which the other had obtained, and the battle went stubbornly on.

But it could not last long, for both the youth and his red foe appeared to be growing weaker and weaker. Suddenly they reeled down the bank and plunged into the river. For a moment the water was churned into a white foam, then all became still, and the Niobrara rolled placidly on. In vain those on the shore watched for the appearance of the head of a friend or foe. Five—ten minutes passed.

"Wal," observed the man called Tom, "they're both gone for sure. They're deader'n Adam by this time."

CHAPTER VIII.

DEATH IN THE DESERT.

THE sun—a big, round ball of fire—hangs low in the western sky.

Three horses and as many riders are making their way among the round, conical sand-hills of the Nebraska Bad Lands. All around them in every direction, as far as the eye can reach, nothing can be seen but hills of sand, dotted here and there with weak, sickly-looking tufts of grass or with the yuccas or Spanish needles. The loose sand crunches beneath the feet of the moving horses. Animals and riders are in the midst of a dreary, desolate desert.

The three persons are Nida Errol and her two captors, Tom and Jack. Twice has the sun rose and set since the unfortunate girl was kidnapped; twice has the sun rose and set since she saw her brave, manly young lover sink beneath the cruel waters of the Niobrara. Shortly after that terrible occurrence her captors were joined by many of the lawless gang which had made the attack upon the sportsmen's camp, then they had been furnished with horses and had carried her away. The others had lingered behind, but she knew not for what purpose.

The poor girl was so nearly exhausted that it was with difficulty that she remained upon the horse. Her captors had not seemed to realize that she was a woman, far from being as strong as a man, and they had failed to allow her sufficient rest. The horses were also nearly exhausted for want of pure, fresh water, for although there were lakes, or little ponds, in that desolate region, the most of them were salt or alkaline. Sometimes one would be found that was pure and fresh, and the water would taste like the nectar of the gods. The men carried provisions and a supply of water in canteens, but the horses were obliged to get along without drinking while they were passing from one fresh water lake to another. Around the fresh lakes was usually a narrow belt of grass or bushes which provided the animals with food.

The sun beat down piteously there, even in the month of October. It did not seem much like the cool, open, grass-covered prairies which lay a comparatively short distance away. The wind, when it rose and swept over the desert, drove the fine particles of sand before it and whirled them round the conical hills. Sometimes when the wind was high the sand swept along in a cloud, and would sting and cut the flesh wherever it struck.

The outlaws and their fair captive had passed through many shifting scenes since entering the borders of the Bad Lands. At one time they were passing through a section where all around them were hills of clay and limestone, which ancient water-courses had cut into the semblance of ruined cities, forts, towers, temples, broken columns, and a thousand other strange and fantastic shapes. Sometimes these strange forms were covered with alkaline crystals, which glittered and gleamed in the sunlight and looked like sparkling silver in the moonlight. It was a strange, weird land, and would have interested Nida very much if she had not been a captive and felt so fatigued.

As they progressed into the desert, the maiden's captors grew more and more morose and sullen, and treated her with diminishing courtesy. She became very much afraid of them, for she knew that she was quite in their power

and they were wicked, unscrupulous rascals. She silently prayed God to protect her, and keep her from harm, and, with a trusting faith that was beautiful and almost childlike, believed that He would care for her. The Prairie Flower was a pure-hearted, innocent child of the plains, yet had courage and self-possession which most women would envy.

Onward they rode into the dreary land. The sun sunk lower and lower. Night was at hand. "We orter make ther next halt shortly arter moonrise, Jack," observed the burly rascal who was called Tom.

"Yes," was the reply, "we shall reach Pearl Lake by that time, and right glad I am. We shall get a taste of good, pure water, and our horses will have some grass that is worth eating."

"We shell reach the'r fu'st den sometime tomorrow, then we'll hev some rest an' suthin' fit ter eat. We kin hide ther gal thar whar she'd never be foun' by her frien's ef they wuz fools ernuff ter cum this fur inter this cussid kentry."

Nida shuddered. Her position seemed hopeless indeed; but thus far she had borne up bravely, and she would not give way now.

"Yes," admitted Jack, "when we get her there she will be forever beyond reach of her friends."

They seemed to take delight in repeating this for Nida's ears, for they must have known their words sent a dart of anguish through their helpless, beautiful captive's heart. For one brief instant she bowed her head and bitter tears dimmed her blue eyes. Then she suddenly dashed the mist away, crying:

"Oh, you wretches! do you think there is no such a thing as retribution? Beware! you shall yet feel the hand of an All-wise God! Retribution will overtake you when you least dream of such a thing!"

For a moment the men seemed awed, then they burst into coarse laughter and mockery, declaring that they were not afraid of the Almighty. It made the girl shudder to hear their fearful talk.

"Stop!" she implored. "You know not what you do when you defy Heaven!"

But her words seemed to have no impression on them. They were hardened and wicked in an appalling degree, yet Bad Lands Bill had chosen them as the most suitable of his band to take charge of the fair captive.

As the sun sunk lower, the sand-hills threw a great army of shadows athwart the dreary waste. All around them was desolation and silence. It seemed to be a weird land of shadows and death. How harshly the sand grated beneath the hoofs of the jaded animals.

For one instant a long, lank, woebegone coyote appeared on the crest of a sand-hill and paused to survey with wonderful eyes the only moving figures to be seen in the lonely waste around him. Only an instant he paused, then, as if nearly frightened out of his senses, he slid away and vanished amid the gathering shadows. He was not a moment too soon, for already had Tom drawn and cocked a revolver.

Reluctantly the sun crept down till only its long red rays shot athwart the land of gloom and desolation. There was something terribly suggestive in the tinge of the last rays of the vanishing god of day—blood red! The hundreds of shadows of the sand-hills had all blended into one grand shadow which was everywhere around the three horses and riders with their faces turned toward the heart of the desert. Finally, with one last flaunt of his crimson banners, the sun disappeared, but behind him upon the horizon he left a bloody haze.

Twilight hovered over the land of silence and shadows.

Suddenly not far away, upon the side of a sand-hill, Nina plainly saw in the gathering gloom the form of the snow-white steed and rider that she had first seen beside the Niobrara on the night of the terrible battle at the camp—the night that she was kidnapped. Both horse and rider were motionless.

The astonished maiden gave a little cry that attracted the attention of her captors, but with that cry the phantom figures seemed to melt away in the gloom. She was more than ever amazed, but certain it was that they had vanished like veritable spirits.

"W'at yer squawkin' in thet way fer?" demanded Tom, laying his hand on a revolver and glancing suspiciously around.

She did not reply.

"Pr'aps ye think yer frien's are nigh," sneered the ruffian. "Ef ye do, let me tell ye ye're muchly mistaken. Our frien's staid ahind ter look arter 'em, an' ther won't none o' 'em git this fur inter this beaucherful kentry."

Ef they do cum er great ways, they are jest shore ter leave their bones hyer."

Nida pretended not to hear him.

Swiftly the twilight deepened into darkness, of which there would be about an hour before the moon rose. The darkness was less terrible than the twilight, for it did not show the weird shapes and shadows which abounded on every hand. Still they pushed onward.

Once more the men fell to blaspheming because they had not reached their stopping-place. When Nida had stood it as long as she could and remain silent, she once more implored them to desist. With sudden fury, one of the brutes turned and struck her.

"May the vengeance of God smite you for that blow!" she cried.

Then there was a bright flash of light a short distance away in the darkness, a heavy, booming report rolled sullenly amid the sand-hills, and the wretch whose fist had smote her fell dead from his horse!

A shout in the gloom, a dark bulk that sweeps down upon them like a tornado, a second report less loud than the first! Then two riderless horses go galloping madly away and their masters lie dead on the sand in the darkness of the desert!

CHAPTER IX.

MOONLIGHT SILENCE AND SHADOWS.

WITH the booming report and the fall of the first ruffian, Nida's horse had sheered quickly, throwing the girl from the rude saddle. She struck heavily on the sand and the freed horse sprang away. Fortunately she was not much hurt; indeed, she did not think herself hurt at all. But she was badly frightened. She heard the second report and saw the other desperado tumble over upon the sand a few feet away. She saw the black bulk that came dashing through the darkness; then, without attempting to arise to her feet, she crawled swiftly away from the terrible spot. For several rods she moved in that manner, then she sunk exhausted at the foot of a sand-hill, and, panting with terror, she turned her eyes toward the spot where the terrible tragedy had taken place in the darkness. There she saw dark forms of a man and a horse, the former muttering as he moved about. They looked like monster demons of the darkness.

Listen!

"Hal! hal! Wretches, you have met your doom! The avenger has tracked you down! I wonder if either of you is the demon who stole my child, slew my poor wife and wrecked my happiness? I will see."

Then the watching girl saw the strange man light a match and bend over to hold it close to the dead men's faces while he eagerly scanned their features. The tiny light showed the terrified girl the ghastly faces of her late captors—dead! It also revealed the bearded face of the terrible slayer, a strange, wild-looking man whom she had never seen before—a face from which gleamed two terrible eyes that filled her with renewed fears. If he found her he might kill her too, for she had not a doubt but that he was a madman.

The match went out, and the strange man muttered his disappointment:

"Neither of them—neither! Oh, Lord! how long! Still the dastardly murderer who wrecked my life escapes my hand! But the hour must come! I will yet find my child and strike the final blow for vengeance."

"But these wretches had a maiden with them. Where can she be? I was careful not to harm her in the darkness, but she has disappeared. I must find her."

These words filled the crouching maiden with still greater terror, and she crept silently and swiftly around the base of the sand-hill, getting as far away as possible. When she was sure that the terrible avenger would not see her, she arose to her feet and fled like a frightened fawn through the darkness, not knowing or caring where she went, so long as she got away, away!

Wild Vulcan—for the slayer of the desperadoes was the strange plainsman—began to look around for the girl, but he could find nothing of her. She seemed to have vanished with the death of the two wretches. In his excitement he had forgotten her for a few moments, but now he began calling and searching for her. There was no answer to the calls, save the faint moan of the wind as it crept wearily over the sand-hills.

"She is gone," muttered the man of the plains, pausing with his hand pressed to his head and vainly trying to pierce the gloom with his keen eyes. "She must have clung to her horse as it galloped wildly away. She will be lost in the desert and perish of hunger and thirst if I do

not find her. But I must find her. I promise her father that I would aid him in recovering his lost child, and I will keep my word. He is not far away, but he nor his friends would ever have reached thus far into this desert land, but for the fear with which I am held by the outlaws and red-skins. The devils would have butchered them all. But the girl, the girl! I must find her!"

With a low whistle he called his horse to his side. Bidding the intelligent animal follow, he began searching for the lost maiden, occasionally calling her name. He did this till he was satisfied that she was nowhere in that vicinity, then he halted with his hand on the neck of his faithful steed.

"Tornado, old friend," said the avenger, stroking the animal's mane, "there is still work before us."

The horse gave a low neigh of pleasure, and touched its master's bearded cheek with its velvet muzzle, an act as soft and tender as the gentlest caress of a woman.

"Yes, there is work before us," repeated Vulcan. "The lost one must be found. We will leave the corpses of those dead brutes to the mercies of the wolves and buzzards. It is a fitting end for such fiendish lives. Decent burial they do not deserve."

Then in the darkness he reloaded his rifle and fitted his cartridge into the empty chamber of his heavy revolver. This done, he sprang upon the back of his faithful steed and gave it rein to turn whichever way it would, trusting to fortune. It happened that the animal turned directly from the place where Nida lay exhausted on the sand.

For a long time Wild Vulcan rode silently through the gloom, always peering keenly to the right and left, hoping to discover the missing maiden.

Finally, the moon crept up till it seemed to rest upon the horizon, flooding the tops of the sand-hills of the silent land with its white, ghostly light and filling the valleys between the hills with shadows. Everything had a strange, weird look.

Wild Vulcan drew rein and glanced around. A low exclamation broke from his lips, for not far away upon the very crest of the highest hill he could see were a white horse and a ghostly-appearing rider—the White Spirit of the Plains.

"There she is again!" softly exclaimed the avenger. "I have seen her many times, but she always flees when I approach. I will give chase if she does this time, and I have yet to find the horse that can hold its own with Tornado. I will speak to her."

He gave a hail and saw the rider of the pale horse turn her face in that direction, but as he was in the shadow of a sand-hill, she could not see him—unless she was a spirit, indeed.

"Hold a moment," cried Vulcan. "I am a friend and wish to speak with you."

There was no reply, but the white steed sprang down the side of the sand-hill—seemed to slide downward—and vanished with its rider in the shadows below.

"Now," gritted the strange man, "now for the chase."

Then he reined his horse and dashed toward the spot where the prairie mystery had disappeared. As he had anticipated, the white steed and its rider broke from the shadow, dashed across a bar of moonlight and plunged into the shadows beyond. Away sped Tornado, bearing Wild Vulcan in swift pursuit.

"I will run her down if it is in this animal," declared the Prairie Thunderbolt. "I am going to solve this mystery and set my doubts at rest. I may be right; who knows?"

On, on through moonlight and shadows the pursued and pursuer dashed—away, away through the silent land. It soon became evident that the white steed would not be easily overtaken, for Tornado did not appear to be gaining. Vulcan's teeth came together with a click and he tried to urge his faithful horse onward a little faster.

For almost an hour the singular race continued, and at the end of that time the rider of the black horse fancied he was gaining. He also felt sure that the white steed had made a wide circle and was not over two or three miles from the place where he had slain the outlaws.

"Ha! ha!" he laughed, as he patted the neck of his foam-flecked steed. "You are gaining, Tornado, old boy. We shall overtake them yet."

The noble animal tossed its head and sprang forward with still greater speed. The rider of the white steed seemed to be growing nervous, for she kept glancing over her shoulder as if measuring the distance that separated them.

"Oh, no! you cannot evade me this time," muttered the pursuer, with triumph. "I have an animal here that is yet to find its match for speed and endurance."

Gradually the nature of the country had changed. The sand-hills had given place to hills of clay and soft lime rock. Suddenly the white horse and rider plunged into the shadows of the valley that had probably been the bed of a great watercourse at some time in the remote ages. Without the least hesitation, Wild Vulcan followed, and the darkness of the place swallowed up both pursuer and pursued.

The strange plainsman kept straight down the valley, for he felt sure that he could not pass the white horse and rider within its narrow confines. He did not heed the strange figures on either hand, but kept his eyes open for those white forms. Although he had grown accustomed to the darkness, he could not see flying figures ahead. He wondered where they could be, but did not doubt that he should overtake them further on.

Suddenly the valley spread out before him and he found himself upon the shore of a beautiful little lake, the bosom of which was bathed in moonlight.

But the white horse and rider were nowhere to be seen. They had vanished!

"Tricked!" cried the man, in dismay. "I know this spot. This is Pearl Lake; but, where is the girl I was pursuing?"

Then far away upon the silvery lake he saw a canoe gliding swiftly along not far from where the shadows fell on the water near a distant shore which rose bluff-like from the water's edge. The canoe contained two occupants, and in an instant the man upon the shore realized that one of them was a girl, probably Nida, the Prairie Flower.

"She has again fallen into the hands of the outlaws," thought Vulcan, as he measured the distance with his eye. "That man is one of the band, for who else can he be? He is carrying her away. I could put a bullet through his head from here in the daytime, but this moonlight is deceptive. However, I will try it."

Removing his rifle from where it hung at his back, he drew back the hammer and lifted the piece to his shoulder. The canoe was making directly toward the dark shadow that fell upon the water and would be out of sight in a moment more. Then a bar of flame leaped from the muzzle of the rifle and the deep report of the heavy piece rolled over the lake. At the same instant Wild Vulcan uttered an exclamation of dismay, for his horse had moved just as he touched the trigger and he felt that he had missed. The shot awoke a hundred echoes, the smoke cleared away, but the canoe and its occupants had vanished.

Then the last echoes died away and moonlight, silence and shadows reigned supreme in the weird land.

CHAPTER X.

THE STRANGE INDIAN'S WARNING.

"DING blast the measly luck! Hyer we are, but blamed ef I know t'other frum whichway! I've roamed erbout ther perayries o' Newbrasky er right smart bit, but I'll allow thet I never tried ter trail er gang o' measly gal-stealers through this year kentry afore. Ef 'tadn't bin fer thet Wild Vulcan keepin' ther outlaws an' reds skeered off an' kinder guvin' us points as ter which way we'd best go, we'd never got this fur. I jest wish Ole Nick Rickway wuz erlive an' hyer ter guv me er piece o' his common hoss sense."

The speaker was Sam Krick. He had halted in perplexity in the midst of the Bad Lands desert and sat on his horse gazing around in gloomy disgust. His companions were Elias Errol, Jot Skywood, Colonel Danglar and five cowboys, making a party of nine persons. All were well mounted and armed to the teeth, as if they anticipated "trouble." with Wild Vulcan's aid they had been pursuing Nida Errol's kidnappers into the dreary land; but now, as they halted near the hour of sunset, they had seen nothing of the strange plainsman for hours.

"I more than half believe that he has led us here and left us to perish," gloomily declared Colonel Danglar.

"Now don't ye go fer ter gittin' enny sich fool notion inter yer noddle," said Sam, grimly. "Wild Vulcan is er white man, an' even ef we never sot eyes onter him erg'in, I c'u'd lead this party back over ther course we hev cum. I don't like ter be taken fer er durned onery fool even ef I be er guide."

Mr. Errol looked dejected, almost heartbroken. "My poor child!" he faintly sighed.

Sam heard his words and a twinge of pain

shot over the queer little old fellow's honest face.

"We'll resky her yit, boss," he grimly nodded. "Wild Vulcan hain't erway all this year time fer nothin', bet yer boots. He may be hot arter ther cusses w'at stole her. I w'u'dn't be er durned bit s'prised ef he sh'u'd tarn up with her enny time."

"Yes, yes! cheer up, Errol!" cried Jot Skywood, in a bluff, hearty way. "Everythin' will come out all right in ther end. We're goin' ter stan' by ye through thick an' thin."

"But it is almost night," said the disheartened ranchman, "and Sam does not seem to know just what to do."

At this the guide's face colored a little.

"I reckon ther only thing we kin do is push on till dark," he asserted. "Wild Vulcan may turn up at 'most enny time an' p'int us in ther right direction. We've got ter stop an' guv ther annymiles er leetle rest afore shortly. Wish we c'u'd fine a fresh-water lake, fer thar they'd git both food an' drink."

After a few moments more of conversation, they started forward again; but they had traveled only a short distance when a figure rose up almost under the horses' feet, seeming to emerge from the sand. In an instant several revolvers covered the apparition, but it flung up its empty hands, crying:

"No shoot! Big Buffalo him frien'. Heap lot like pale-face. Ugh!"

It was evidently the sorriest-looking specimen of an Indian that any of the party had ever seen. His face was daubed with dirt and paint, and his hair hung in his eyes. An old lopped-brimmed hat was pulled well down upon his head, but half the crown was gone. His pants were ragged and much too large in the legs to "set" in anything like a stylish manner, although they were barely long enough to reach the tops of his well-worn boots. But it was probable that the set of his clothes did not trouble the noble son of the plains to any great extent, for his general appearance indicated that he did not pay much attention to the prevailing fashion. He was also the possessor of a scornful disregard of dirt, for the scarlet blanket—it had been scarlet once—which hung from one shoulder in a manner that was quite *neglige*, was decidedly greasy and dirty. The belt of weapons around his waist contained a knife, tomahawk and rusty-looking revolver. He was a tall, ungainly savage, and looked anything but formidable.

"Hell-o!" exclaimed Sam Krick. "What hev we hyer, er gentle son o' ther wilderness?"

"Good Indian—heap frien'," replied the dirty fellow, still keeping his hands above his head and nodding in a manner that caused the hat-brim to flap down over his eyes. "Saw good pale-faces come; saw bad ones git out. Good pale-faces git in high ole row—heap fight."

"What is he trying to get through him?" impatiently asked Mr. Errol, while Colonel Danglar regarded the red-skin closely, as if seeking to discern something familiar about his appearance.

"W'at d'ye mean?" demanded the guide. "Talk straight, you spoiled child o' Mother Earth, ef you don't want us ter meck mince-meet o' yer gangly carcass."

"Big Buffalo him no talk crooked. Bad pale-faces heap lay fer good pale-faces. Night come quick. Good pale-faces sleep. Bad men come. Whoop! Take um skulp. All dead very much soon. See?"

Colonel Danglar moved restlessly on his horse. "What kind of a lie is the dirty rascal telling?" he asked.

The Indian brushed back the hat-brim with one hand and turned savagely toward the sneering speaker.

"Injun speak truth," he asserted, a dangerous ring in his voice. "Injun not have crooked tongue like some bad white men. Him come to help pale-faces. Better not call Big Buffalo names!"

Danglar laid his hand on a revolver.

"Furies!" he snarled. "Do you dare to threaten me, you greasy dog? By heavens, I'll—"

"No, ye won't, kernel!" interrupted the veteran guide, with grim emphasis, as he covered the enraged man with a hastily drawn revolver. "Go a little slow, thar! We want ter hear w'at this gent bes ter say."

Delos ground out a baffled oath, for it almost seemed that he had intended to shoot the strange Indian.

"You ought to know that all red whelps are treacherous, Krick," he said, making an effort to hold his temper. "This *fresh* specimen of the race is probably here for the purpose of

drawing us into some trap. He is probably one of the outlaws' tools. As for me, I refuse to be imposed upon by the greasy rascal. If we listen to his lies we shall probably all be butchered."

"It won't do enny hurt ter hear jest w'at he's got ter say," persisted Sam, stubbornly. "Ez Uncle Josh uster say, 'Ye kin hear er man's yarn, then take it fer w'at it is w'u'th.' Since I heerd him say thet, I've allus dun considerable lissenin', an' hev usually foun' er leetle dite o' truth in ther biggest lies. Continner ter propel yer mouth, red-skin."

"Big Buffalo know whar fort am. Pale-faces make big fight thar—lick bad men. Ugh! Lick um bad! Injun take pale-faces to fort."

"There you have it!" sneered Danglar. "Now you ought to be able to see through his trick, even if your head is as thick as it seems to be."

"Thankee fer ther complymint," Sam fired back, without glancing at the ex-officer. "It may turn out thet *you* are ther one with ther thick head, arter all. Ef it duz prove so, I hope it will l'arn ye ter take er reef in yer jaw an' improve yer spar' time by bein' delightfully silent."

"Now, Injun, w'at proof hev we thet ye're not lyin' ter us, an' tryin' ter git us inter er trap?"

"Big Buffalo not lie. Him go with pale-faces. If him lie, pale-faces take um skulp."

"Wal, thet's fair, b'gosh! At ther same time, I dunno ez enny o' us 'd set enny partick'ler value onter yer skulp; but let me tell ye thet ef ye play us foul, we'll send ye ter ther Happy Huntin' Groun's by ther shortest cut. Sail er-head; we'll foller."

Half-an-hour later, just as the sun disappeared behind the distant sand-hills, the strange Indian led them into what was indeed a natural fort. From a distance it looked like a cone with the top cut off, but it proved to be a sort of circular wall of earth as high as an ordinary man's breast. The sand had swept around its outer base, but for some unaccountable reason, had not sifted over into it and filled it. There was a break in the wall, through which the horses were driven one at a time. If they could be made to lie down within the "fort," there would be no danger of their being hit by flying bullets in case the place should be stormed.

"Wal," said Sam, turning to Danglar when the entire party had entered, "w'at d'yer think o' it now?"

But the colonel deigned no reply.

"Ugh! Look!" exclaimed Big Buffalo, as the red had called himself, pointing away toward the point where the blood-red haze hung low down in the western sky. "Bad men! See?"

They turned in the direction indicated and far away they plainly saw against the ruddy sky the dark figure of a man who was standing on the top of a sand cone, evidently surveying the surrounding country. For several minutes the man stood there, then he sprang down and disappeared from view.

"By Jonah!" exclaimed Sam. "Red-skin, you've got almost ez sharp eyes ez ole Zeke Truck pretended he had. But ole Zeke uster impose on ther simon-pure unadulterated truth ter an unpardonable extent w'en he tole 'bout his eyesight. Speakin' o' thet 'minds me how Uncle Josh caught ther ole coon one time. Ye see Zeke he wuz allus tellin' how fur he c'u'd see er bee or er fly or even er medium-sized skeeter, so one time Uncle Josh he putt up a job ter catch ther decepsbus ole rascal. In them days they uster be lots o' wild bees in ther woods, and they wuz lots o' bee-hunters. They would catch er wild bee an' putt him in er leetle glass box with some boney, an' w'en he'd got his load, they w'u'd let him out an' he'd meck er bee-line for his hive. They'd watch him an' tell in which direction ther hive wuz."

"Wal, one day Uncle Josh he pertended as how he wanted Zeke ter watch er bee fer him so thet he c'u'd tell which way ter go ter git ther honey an' capter ther swarm. Zeke he tried ter git out o' it, but Uncle Josh w'u'd hev him 'cause his eyes wuz so much keener than everybuddy's else's. Thar wuz lots o' ther neybors er watchin' o' ther business, fer they knew thar wuz some fun cumin' in somewhar. W'en everythin' wuz reddy, Josh he showed ole Zeke ther bee in ther leetle box. Ther bee wuz thar rite under er glass slide."

"Now," sez Uncle Josh, fumblin' with ther slide an' givin' it er snap ez he opened it wide open, 'now, Zeke, watch him close. Look sharp, or you'll lose 'im.'

"Then Zeke he begun whirlin' roun' an' roun'—bees allus meck er circle ter git ther bearin' afore they start for ther wigwam—an' he kep' er sayin': 'There he goes—there he goes—here—

rite thar, thar, thar—there he goes.' Then all o'er sudden he stopped an' kep' p'intin' an' sayin': 'He's er goin' way thar torruds Bob Junk's. He's gone rite over that leetle pond—see him? There he goes over Smith's field'—Smith's field wuz two milds erway. 'There he goes over Shackly's woods'—four milds erway. 'There he crosses ther Harmon road.' An' so Zeke pertended ter watch the bee tell he vanished in er piece o' timber eight milds erway!

'W'en 'twuz all over Uncle Josh sez, sez he: 'Your eyes are mighty keen, Zeke.' Thet pleased ther ole feller, an' he grinned an' admitted thet they wuz, though he thort they didn't reach out quite ser well ez they did when he wuz er young man. 'Wal, they do pritty well,' sez Uncle Josh, 'speshully w'en they see er bee travel ser fur thet hain't started a fall.' Then he showed Zeke ther open box, with ther bee still in it! Ther ole feller with ther sharp eyes uttered a groan an' axed w'at wuz ther matter with ther blasted bee. Uncle Josh grinned ez hesed: 'Oh, northin', only he's dead!' Thet settled Zeke, for he never bragged erbout his eyesight erg'in."

Sam concluded the story, and looked for some one to make a remark. He was not disappointed, for the Indian grunted and calmly observed:

"Heap big lie!"

For a moment the old guide looked astounded, but his face turned red as his comrades broke into a laugh, and he shook his fist under the dirty critic's nose, fiercely exclaiming:

"Durn your skin! Do you dast ter tell me thet I lie? Thet yarn is ther ginoowine fu'st-brand G. Wasin'toa truth, an' b'gosh! I c'u'd prove it ef Ole Nick Rickway wuz erlive!"

After that Sam relapsed into moody and injured silence. The party made preparations for a battle, for the sight of the man on the hill-top had convinced them that there was something in the Indian's story. Darkness settled over the desert, and every man stood at his post ready for the assault. But it did not come.

Suddenly Sam Krick declared that he heard the distant report of a rifle. None of the others had heard it, and somewhere in the darkness the strange red-skin muttered:

"Heap long sight ears! Hear dead bee buzz somewhar, think hear gun go! Ugh! waugh!"

There was an unlimited amount of disgust in the two final exclamations. Sam uttered a dismal groan, and sighed:

"Oh, Lawd! hev I got ter massycree thet Injun?"

Finally, the moon rose, and still there were no signs of an attack. The red-skin, Big Buffalo, was sitting in the midst of the fort, apparently serenely sleeping with his greasy blanket wrapped around him and his head bowed upon his knees.

An hour slipped away, still our friends remained unmolested. Colonel Danglar laughed and sneered. He declared that they had been tricked by a dirty red-skin; he heaped all manner of abuse upon Big Buffalo; he said he believed the Indian had led them there to die of hunger and thirst; their horses were almost exhausted for want of water; the red dog was responsible for it all. Through all this abuse the strange Indian appeared to sleep peacefully.

Thirty minutes more passed by. The cowboys grew restless, for they began to believe that Danglar was right. Mr. Errol freely expressed his impatience, and Sam Krick began to look as if he was fooled. Then Big Buffalo suddenly arose, holding up one hand and saying:

"Lissen!"

Some distance away a low, clear whistle rung out. In a moment it was answered in a similar manner in another direction.

"Bad men come!" cried the red-skin. "Much big fight!"

Then, uttering wild yells, two bodies of horse-men appeared on opposite sides of the fort and came charging down upon it like prairie cyclones!

CHAPTER XI.

A TRANSFORMATION AND A DISAPPEARANCE. "Ter yer posts, every galoot!" yelled Sam Krick. "Hyer cum ther howlin' hyenas er-humpin'! Guv 'em glory ter ther Lamb!"

The men sprung to their places, and, as usual, Colonel Danglar appeared very excited; indeed, he was so excited that he leaped upon the wall of the fort in full view of the advancing parties, recklessly exposing his person as he fired his revolver twice and cried:

"Back—back, ye devils! It means death to come here!"

The effect of his words seemed magical, for the outlaws fired a scattering volley then swept

round in a sharp half-circle and vanished into the shadows of the sand-hills again, having experienced no loss from the colonel's shots or the stray bullets sent after them by one or two of the cowboys as they turned.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Danglar, as he leaped down from the wall. "They are afraid of us; they dare not attack us here."

"Stan' ter yer posts every man," commanded the guide, "thet may be er trick, an' they may cum down onter us erg'in. Don't let 'em catch us er-sleepin'."

"Whoop!" shouted Big Buffalo, dancing round within the inclosure and brandishing his tomahawk. "W'at Injun say! Now show Injun cuss w'at say him lie! Take um skulp! Whoop! Big Buffalo bully boy—heap big brave."

"Ye're er brick, you soiled fragment o' er noble race," was Sam's compliment. "I'll sw'ar by ye, even though ye hev heaped stigma upon this devoted head."

"Whar white man git big words?" demanded the red-skin, suddenly halting in his dance and staring wonderingly at the guide. "Him eat pale-face knowledge book?"

But Sam paid no attention to the singular question from a singular Indian, for he was keeping a sharp lookout for the return of the bandits. He could not believe that they had thus suddenly forsaken their purpose and given up the attack.

Meantime, Elias Errol was saying to Colonel Danglar:

"My dear colonel, you were very indiscreet in thus exposing yourself. You might have been picked off by the wretches, for you made an excellent target. It is a wonder that you are alive. I congratulate you."

"Oh! that is nothing," asserted the former officer. "I always sprung into the thickest danger in my old army days, and my comrades used to say I had a charmed life, for I never was injured seriously. In those old days they called me Dauntless Danglar and Dashing Delos. In the first of a battle I am always excitable, but I soon cool down, and my brain is wonderfully clear."

"Well, I beg you to be a little more careful, for you might pay for your rashness with your life, and we cannot spare a single man of this party. We need them all to cope with the desperadoes around us."

Ten—twenty minutes passed, but the outlaws did not reappear. Colonel Danglar freely expressed his belief that they had been frightened away.

"They did not expect to find us on the lookout for them," said Danglar, "and when they failed to catch us napping, they remembered their recent defeat beside the Niobrara and gave up the intended butchery. It was fortunate that we were watching."

"Ugh!" grunted Big Buffalo. "Much fine talk! Him same pale-face call Injun liar. Him take back or Injun lift um ha'r."

With these words the red-skin advanced threateningly on the doughty colonel, who again grasped a revolver, savagely snarling:

"Keep your distance, you dirty dog! I won't take any chin from such as you!"

"Hyer, hyer!" cried Sam Krick. "Hev I got ter keep you two frum fightin' all ther time? Turn roun' hyer an' keep yer peepers peeled fer outlaws. If I ketch ye quarrelin' erg'in, I'll punch ther heads o' all two both o' ye!"

"Heap big talk!" sneered Big Buffalo, who appeared to be in a belligerent mood. "Much small man. Injun knock stuffin' out."

Then he threw down his tomahawk and advanced on Sam with his fists clinched. The old guide was paralyzed with amazement, and he stared at the strange savage without making a move to defend himself.

"Come," cried Big Buffalo. "Little runt with big mouth putt up him dukes Injun knock him pritty thunderin' quick. Injun no slouch! Whoop! Him chaw white man's ear! Hi-yi!"

Then the singular red-skin began to caper round and swing his arms in the wildest manner. A look of intelligence broke over the guide's face.

"Ther durned critter's bin drinkin' fire-water!" he exclaimed, in disgust. "We'll have er crazy Injun on our han's afore long."

"Little long-eared man lie!" asserted the red, suddenly cooling down. Him scat. Him fight, Injun knock corners off um. Him don't fight, Injun spank um."

Sam gasped:

"Spank—Great Jonah! thet's too much! I will fight, but you're ther quarest red I ever saw. W'at kind o' er Injun are ye anyhow?"

"Seems ter me ye'r durned partwickerler ter find out. You—"

But the little guide had started forward with a yell of amazement, staring into the face of the Indian, who had thrown off his wide-brimmed hat. Then Sam gave a great whoop of delight and clasped the supposed savage in his arms and hugged him, greasy blanket, dirt and all.

"Holy heavens ter Betsey!" howled the guide, as he strained the grotesque figure to his bosom and danced around in a manner which convinced his companions that he had suddenly gone crazy. "Oh, mother o' Moses! It's Ole Nick Rickway, my ole pard, erlive, b'gosh! I believe I shell die o' pure delight! Oh, Nick, Nick! you ole prayrje blossom! this year's too good ter be true!"

And the "Injun" folded the little man in his long arms and laughed as if he were going into convulsions.

"Played it on ye, Samuel!" he chuckled. "Fooled ye in great shape, ole man! I held in jest ez long ez I c'u'd. Ha! ha! ha! It wuz jest too good fer anythin'!"

By this time the others began to understand the situation. The supposed Indian was none other than Old Nick Rickway in disguise, the eccentric old plainsman having escaped death in the river in some way. He had assumed the role of an Indian and had deceived them all. It was plain that he had saved their lives by warning them of the impending attack from the outlaws, and, with the exception of Colonel Danglar, they crowded round him, eager to grasp his hand.

When the general handshaking was over, Sam called on Nick to explain how he escaped death in the river. This the queer old fellow did in a few words. He had not been touched by the bullet of the would-be assassin, though he felt the wind from the lead as it hummed past his head. Fearing a repetition of the shot, he had pretended to be hit and had dived overboard, coming up behind the canoe and floating down the river with the frail craft. When he was out of sight he had swum ashore and started to keep his word and bring Nida Errol back to her father. He had trailed the kidnappers into the Bad Lands, been discovered by one of the outlaws' red allies and forced to fight for his life. He had slain the red-skin and been seized with the idea of disguising himself in the savage's clothes and painting his face. This he did, and by pulling his hair over his eyes and keeping the brim of the old hat lopped over his forehead, had succeeded in deceiving his old pard. He had been watching the outlaws, and from their movements had decided that they would attack Mr. Errol's party that night.

Barely had Nick made this explanation when one of the cowboys uttered an exclamation and a black horse bearing a rider was seen galloping toward them through the moonlight.

"It's Wild Vulcan!" cried Jot Skywood.

And so it proved. The strange plainsman drew rein outside the fort, calling:

"Helloa, friends! I heard the sound of your shots while far away and hastened hither, thinking you might be in trouble. But I fancy you need have no further fear of your enemies for the present, for I have been watching a large body of outlaws and reds who are riding rapidly away from here. They are miles away by this time."

This was pleasant news, and Mr. Errol at once hastened to Vulcan's side and asked him if he brought him any news of his child. The rider of the black horse replied by telling him what the reader already knows, for he had left the little lake soon after firing at one of the occupants of the canoe. Mr. Errol was eager to move to the lake at once, and Vulcan thought it best for the entire party to do so, as food for the horses and water for men and animals could be found there.

Soon the entire party was ready to move, and when they started Colonel Danglar, moody and silent, dropped back to the rear. Wild Vulcan led the party, of course. The peculiar pards, Sam Krick and Old Nick rode the same horse and grew hilarious with their jokes and stories.

Straight to the valley of shadows their new guide led them. Down the dark gorge in which the mysterious White Spirit had disappeared they rode till the little lake sleeping in the moonlight broke upon their view. It was a lovely sight, and nearly every one of the party uttered exclamations of delight.

"Ah-ha! Oh-ho!" cried Old Nick. "There-in I propose ter bathe an' remove some o' this year dirt an' paint from my pusson."

"Fer heaving's sake," implored Sam, "wait tell we all git one good drink afore ye p'isen ther watter!"

"Hello!" exclaimed Jot Skywood. "Whar's Inglar?"

Then it was discovered that the colonel was not with them—he had disappeared.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MAN IN THE MOON.

UNDER the circumstances, Nida Errol's fear of the strange slayer of her captors was quite natural. In the darkness the man was not seen till he shot the wretch who had just struck the girl, and when Nida's horse sprung to one side, throwing her to the ground, she more than half believed that the attack had been made upon her. She did not pause to reason that a foe of her captors would naturally be a friend to her; but, when she saw that dark bulk in the gloom, saw the flash and heard the second report, following which the ruffian Jack fell dead on the sand, she did the very thing that any terrified girl would have done had not her strength deserted her—she crept swiftly away into the darkness.

A short distance away she paused and lay still upon the sand, looking back toward that terrible spot where the tragedy had been enacted in the gloom of early night. She saw the two dark forms of the man and horse and heard Wild Vulcan mutter words which caused her to believe that he was a madman. The faint light of the match which the avenger struck showed her the faces of the dead men and their dreadful destroyer. Then she crept away once more. She did not think that she might get lost in that dreary desert and perish of hunger and thirst; she only thought to get away, away.

"Heaven protect and guide me!" she whispered.

She crept round the base of a sand-hill and drew a breath of relief when she could see those dark figures no longer. Then she arose to her feet and ran silently over the sand. She did not pause to consider her course, but she felt that she was getting further away—further from the spot where the dead men lay and their wild-looking slayer bent above them, muttering and laughing.

For ten minutes she hurried on, but her breath began to come in short, quick gasps, and finally she was forced to sit down upon the sand and rest. In her excitement she had not noticed it, but now she heard a strange voice far away calling her. It filled her with renewed fear, for she felt that the terrible unknown was searching for her. As soon as she could do so, she arose and moved swiftly away.

But she was tired and weak, and it was not long before she was forced to stop and rest again. She lay down upon the sand all alone in the darkness of the desert and fell asleep. However, she did not sleep long before the bark of a coyote aroused her. The moon was just rising. She listened, and again she heard the scavenger of the desert. A shudder ran over her, for the sound came from near where she believed the tragedy had taken place, and she fancied that the cowardly animal was rejoicing over the feast that he had discovered. The thought was horrible, and she struggled to her feet to move slowly on once more.

The moon came up and touched the top of the sand cones with its white, spectral light. But the shadows still lurked everywhere at the feet of the hills. How lonely it was! The very silence, so strange, so weird, filled the poor lost girl with terror. She clasped her hands and cried aloud. The sound of her own voice frightened her, yet she was far from a cowardly maiden.

How long she hurried forward she knew not, but at length she thought she heard a sound and halted at the foot of a hill in the deepest shadows. A few moments later the strange white horse and rider swept past. The moonlight fell full upon the face of the girl whose snowy robes fluttered behind her showing it to be pale and beautiful. The next moment horse and rider vanished in the shadows beyond, and Wild Vulcan swept past in pursuit. At that moment Nida fancied that the face of the strange man looked quite like a madman. She recognized it as the same as the one she had seen bending over the dead men, even though at that time she had caught but a glimpse of it by the flaring light of the tiny match.

On swept pursued and pursuer and the sound of the race died out in a moment. Once more the Prairie Flower was alone in the desert. What strange things the pale moon saw enacted within the boundaries of that silent land that night!

Nida turned her face toward the moon and went forward once more. The beautiful orb seemed to smile kindly upon her and beckon her

onward. Involuntarily she stretched out her hands in mute appeal to it, the only friend she seemed to have left.

It was not long after this that, happening to glance toward the moon, she saw that it seemed to rest upon a sand hill only a short distance away. It had risen just high enough to appear to touch the very crest of the cone. The maiden uttered a little exclamation, for it almost seemed that the goddess of night had left the heavens to come to the lost one in the desert. Then her exclamation changed to one of dismay as she saw the figure of a man's head and shoulders appear within the disk!

For a moment Nida stood spellbound, gazing at the strange figure of the man in the moon, then she sunk down upon the sand in the shadows. She realized that a man had been climbing the opposite side of the hill and his head and shoulders had come between her and the moon. She felt that it must be a foe, and prayed that he had not seen her or heard her exclamation.

For some time the unknown stood quite still between her and the moon, apparently listening. There seemed something strangely familiar in his appearance, but Nida had no thought of finding a friend there. She feared that he would come down the hill toward her, and her fear was well grounded, for that was just what he did. At first she was tempted to spring up and flee, but she reasoned that he would surely see her, and of course, being a man, he could run the faster and would overtake her. For that reason, she decided to remain quiet, trusting that he would not discover her. Nearer and nearer came the unknown, until, finally, he halted a short distance away and muttered:

"I am sure I heard a little cry, and I fancied that I saw a moving figure down here."

Nida nearly sprung to her feet in amazement. The voice—could it be Paul's? It had certainly sounded like her lover's voice, but could it be that he was not dead? She feared that she had been deceived by a fancied resemblance, and so she lay still and listened.

"My horse is dead," she heard that same voice continue; "I know not how I am going to continue the search. Oh, Nida, my poor darling!"

Then she sprung up, almost shrieking:

"Thank God—all! Paul, Paul, I am here!"

In a moment he had her in his arms and was covering her face with kisses and calling her a hundred pet names. He seemed almost beside himself with joy; and Nida—she had not come so near fainting for years. But she did not. She wound her arms around his neck and whispered:

"Oh, Paul, Paul, Paul!"

What a world of untold joy and love there was in that exclamation, whispered though it was. It seemed almost as if the dead had returned to life for her to again see her noble young lover whom she had seen disappear beneath the waters of the Niobrara. She felt as if her troubles were all over, she was safe in her lover's arms.

Paul strained her to his heart till it almost seemed that he would crush her in his intense joy. He appeared to fear to release her in the least, lest she fade away and prove nothing but a delusive phantom. But there was nothing phantom-like in the warm lips which his own pressed again; there was nothing phantom-like in the clinging arms around his neck. No, no, it was Nida in flesh and blood.

The first raptures of the meeting over, Nida told her story and Paul explained how he had finished the Indian under water, but dared not rise to the surface for fear of being shot by the kidnappers. He was close to the shore and, carrying the dead red skin, he swam to the water's edge and arose amid some bushes that fully concealed him. Before he could again attempt to rescue Nida, the two ruffians were joined by many of their comrades and it was impossible for him to render her any assistance. He had secured a horse and trailed the kidnappers into a desert; but had lost the animal in an alkali sink. He believed that Providence had led him to her.

"But, Paul," said Nida, when he had finished, "we are in danger of being captured by the bandits of the Bad Lands, for their retreat is somewhere in this strange section of the country."

"I know a hiding-place, darling," replied the young plainsman, "a little cave beside Pearl Lake. We shall be safe there till I can communicate with our father, who is somewhere within the limits of the Bad Lands searching for you. The lake is at least three miles from here. Do you think you can walk so far?"

"Oh, yes, yes! I am strong now, for I feel that I am safe with you, dear Paul."

But she was far from being as strong as she

thought, for they had traveled less than two miles when her strength forsook her, and she said that she would have to sit down and rest. But the sturdy young plainsman lifted her in his arms and bore her along as if she were a child. She placed her arm over his neck and laid her head against his.

"Paul," she whispered, "I am so, so happy! I wish we might be together forever and forever."

He pressed her closer and kissed her again, as he replied:

"We will be, my darling—forever and forever."

After a time she was able to walk again, and finally the little lake was reached. It seemed well named, for it looked pure as a pearl as it lay bathed in the silvery moonlight.

Paul found a canoe where it was concealed amid some bushes, and they embarked. With strong strokes he pulled toward the distant shadows, but ere they reached them, a booming detonation rolled over the placid surface of the tiny lake, and a bullet cut close to Paul's head.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DESERTED CAVE AND A DYING TORCH.

FORTUNATE it was for Prairie Paul that Wild Vulcan's horse moved just as its master touched the trigger of the deadly rifle. But for that lucky accident the Young Prairie Whirlwind would have sunk in the canoe beside the maiden he loved, a bullet in his brain. But within the deep shadows near the lake-shore, the youth was safe from another shot.

"Oh, Paul!" whispered Nida, "we are discovered!"

"But quite safe, darling," he said, in a low, reassuring tone. "The cave is near at hand."

"But look! That man is still watching us."

Paul glanced over his shoulder and saw the dark figure of the horse and rider on the lake-shore, seemingly as motionless in the moonlight as if they were carved from stone. The unknown man seemed to be gazing out on the lake, evidently trying to pierce the shadows into which the canoe had disappeared.

"Let him watch," laughed the young plainsman, softly. "He cannot see us here, and if he waits there for the canoe to come out into the moonlight, he will have a tiresome task on his hands."

"He may come round here and find us."

"He may come round, but he will not find us. The cave will hide us safely, and that can only be reached by water."

Paul allowed the canoe to remain motionless in the shadows while they watched the man and horse on shore. For a little time Wild Vulcan remained gazing out over the moonlit bosom of the little lake, but finally, without a word, he reined Tornado round and rode back into the darkness of the old watercourse.

"He is gone!" breathed Nida, joyfully.

"Yes, he is gone. Now for the cave."

The youth drove the canoe along swiftly for a short distance, and paused close to the overhanging bank, out of which grew a few sickly-looking bushes, which dipped till they almost touched the water. These bushes Paul softly parted, and then clinging to them, he drew the canoe into the utter darkness beneath. For a few seconds the frail craft floated lightly on, and Nida felt that they were within the cave. Then there came a little shock, and Paul spoke:

"Here we are, Nida. Keep quiet and I will soon have a light that will reveal our surroundings."

Then the canoe rocked gently, and Nida's end settled lower in the water, telling that the young man had stepped out of it. His voice had sounded strange and hollow there in the darkness of the strange cave, and the maiden could not repress a slight shudder when she felt that she was in the canoe alone.

But soon Paul struck a match near at hand, and lighted a torch of some kind of pitchy wood. The torch gave a dim, wavering light, which filled the place with a thousand moving shadows, but it was better than no light at all, for it showed Nida the face of the gallant youth whom she loved so truly. The cave was quite small, and Paul was not able to stand upright in any part of it. When the torch flamed up, the girl saw him crouching beside an old upturned canoe a few feet away. At his feet was a little pile of sticks, which had evidently been brought there to serve as torches.

"Oh, for a cave in some vast wilderness!" laughed the youth, as he waved the torch to and fro, to fan it into a more vigorous blaze.

"How like you the prospect, my little Nida?"

"Oh, it's jolly!" was her reply, as she glanced round with a shudder. "I have read of such

places as this, and dreamed of them, but I never expected to find myself in one; but I do not mind it at all so long as you are near, Paul."

The young plainsman thrust the unlighted end of the torch into a crevice where it would remain upright, then he stepped back into the canoe.

"This place has served me as a hiding-place before," he said. "Old Daddy Nick was the discoverer of it, and one time when we were closely pursued by reds, he and I came here and hid away from them. We had to remain here for two days without food, but the water of Pearl Lake is pure and sweet, and we did not suffer from thirst."

"How long do you think we shall have to remain here?" asked Nida.

"Not long, I hope. Your father, with a party of friends can not be many miles from here, and they will be likely to come to this lake to obtain fresh water and give their horses a chance to feed. Keep a good heart, Nida, for I am satisfied that the worst of your troubles are about over."

"Oh, I hope so! But, Paul, do you know if that evil-appearing man, Colonel Danglar, is with father's party? I wish I might never see him again!"

"He is probably with the party, for you know that your father holds him in very high esteem."

"He will not hold him so highly when I have a chance to tell him the truth concerning the part that the colonel really took in the struggle with those two ruffians on the shore of the river. I meant to expose Danglar's lies, for he made it appear that he was the one who saved me from the wretches, when really you saved us both."

"Yes," said the youth, looking at her strangely, "I did not dispute his story, for I knew that it would be useless while you remained silent."

"Oh, Paul, do not think hard of me for that! I was excited then, and I really feared that man. I truly intended to tell father the facts as soon as I had a chance; but I have not yet had the chance."

"That is all right, little one. I know you meant well, and I am quite sure your father will yet get his eyes open to Delos Danglar's true character. Perhaps it will be better to let him discover the truth himself."

"He can never, never force me to marry that man!" asserted the maiden, with determination. "I hate Danglar as much as—as—as I love some one else."

At this the hot-blooded youth managed to kiss her, although he came near upsetting the canoe in doing so.

"There, there, sir!" she laughingly exclaimed, although she pretended to be a little—just a little—angry. "Do you want to drown us both?"

"Not at all," he replied; "although if we were to drown, I would hope that we would be together. For me there might be a worse fate, endless separation. But if the canoe should upset we should not drown, for the water here is not more than two and a half feet deep. We would simply take a bath, and as for me, I need it bad enough, after my trip over this sandy desert."

"You are the same Paul that I first knew at school," Nida declared. "I remember the first day you came; I shall never forget it."

"Nor I, for then I saw you first. I remember how I looked at you slyly, and thought you the most beautiful thing I had ever seen."

"Flattery! That was because you knew so little of girls. You were only used to the mountains and the prairies."

"I had seen many lovely things in nature, but nothing equaled you, my little Nida. You were as frail, delicate and beautiful as the fairest prairie flower."

"And you were the one who first called me the Prairie Flower. Oh, Paul, the memory of those old days are very sweet!"

"You are right; their memory has cheered me many a night as I roamed all alone over the boundless plains or slept with the mountains and stars for my only companions. A hundred times—nay, more than a thousand times have I blessed Old Daddy Nick for sending me to school to obtain a little education and meet you. Nick was very good to me, Nida, and I can hardly give him up as dead, though I have searched everywhere without finding him. Still it seems that he is alive."

"For your sake, I hope that he is, Paul, though it does seem strange that after searching so long for him, you have found no trace."

"I am not going to give up hope; he may turn up when least expected. You know he is searching for a lost child, that was how I came to fall into his hands. He may have struck the trail of the lost one. I hope he has, for the patient search of years will be rewarded. Daddy almost always seems jolly and full of fun, but there are times when he is gloomy and sad when he gets to thinking of the past."

"But, Paul, while I think of it, how came you to know of the intended attack on our camp by the outlaws?"

"I overheard them talking over the attack hours before in a piece of timber miles from the camp. I did not catch but little of what they said, but it was enough, and as soon as I could get away, I hastened to warn your father and his companions."

"One more question: How came you to follow those wretches who kidnapped me? You came up with us before we were very far away."

"And would have rescued you had not that red-skin taken a hand. I followed the kidnappers closely because I was on the outlook for such a move; but while we were defending the camp, the outlaws stole a march on me. When I slipped back to see if you were all right, I caught a glimpse of moving figures down on the river's bank. By the time I had skulked down there your kidnappers were carrying you away in a canoe. Of course I could not be certain that they had you with them, for they kept within the shadows, but I felt that they had been up to mischief of some kind, and I followed them."

Thus the lovers talked for a long time, but finally, Nida declared that she was so sleepy that she could not keep her eyes open. Paul at once stepped from the canoe and bade her lie down in the bottom while he remained close by. She did so and fell asleep in a few moments.

By this time the torch which Paul had lighted was well burned out, and so he replaced it with another. He had not explained to Nida that those pieces of pitch-wood were there when Nick Rickway led him to the cave years before and that the eccentric old borderman could not tell how they came there. If he told her this, he was afraid that she would think that the outlaws knew of the place, and so might discover them.

While Nida was sleeping, he resolved to go out and take a survey of the surroundings. By using the canoe which had been concealed within the cave, he could do this without disturbing Nida, and it was not long before he had the light craft in the water and was paddling silently out of the cave, leaving the girl sleeping in the other canoe.

Barely had the young man left the cave when he heard voices, and, looking toward the shore from which the unknown man had fired at him, he saw a party of ten or a dozen persons.

"Bandits!" he muttered, taking care to keep within the now narrow rim of shadow. "They are looking for us."

Creeping along close to the shore he succeeded in leaving the canoe without being seen. Within twenty minutes he was looking down at the party on the shore from a distance of less than twenty rods. To his amazement he heard familiar voices and recognized Mr. Errol and Sam Krick! Satisfied that it was a party of friends, he hailed them and made his presence known. Then he boldly advanced toward them, but while he was yet two or three rods away, Old Nick Rickway gave a whoop of delight, ran forward and caught the astounded young plainsman in his arms.

"It is my boyee Paul!" shouted the strange old fellow. "I hain't seen ther lad fer er blessed long day, but I know ther looks o' him."

Paul's joy cannot be described. Every one had given Old Nick up for dead, except the young plainsman, and even he had grown to think that it might be so, for a year of searching had failed to discover any trace of the man who had been a father to him in his queer way. But at last Rickway had turned up as suddenly as he disappeared.

After the first excitement of the reunion, explanations were in order. Mr. Errol's joy on learning that his child was near and safe was unbounded. He was eager to go to her, and soon he started, with Paul and Old Nick. They made their way to the canoe and entered, the youth taking the paddle. In a few moments they had reached the bushes which concealed the opening to the cave. Without stopping to part the bushes, Paul turned the craft sharply and drove it through and under them clean into the cave with a single stroke.

"Here we are," he cried.

Then an exclamation of wonder and delight broke from his lips. The faint light of the dying torch revealed a startling fact that fairly paralyzed him with amazement.

The canoe and the fair sleeper were gone—vanished from the cave!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BATTLE ON THE LAKE.

"My God!" cried Paul. "She is gone!"

"Gone!" echoed Mr. Errol. "Oh, heavens! my child!"

"Gone!" gasped Old Nick. "Howlin' misery-ation! Whar has she gone ter?"

But Paul was unable to answer the question. "She cannot have awakened and, having found me absent, propelled the canoe out upon the lake," he said, slowly, appearing quite dazed.

"She may have done so!" exclaimed the rancher, eagerly catching at the least hope.

"No, no," said the youth, shaking his head. "She has not done that, for I have the paddle in my hands that belonged with that canoe."

"An' we sh'ud 'a' seen her w'en we wuz cumin' hyer," put in the veteran borderman.

The three were frightened, puzzled and dismayed. It was plain that Nida was gone, but where had she so mysteriously vanished to and what was the cause of her sudden disappearance? Those were unanswerable questions just then. They gazed blankly into each other's faces for a moment, then the dying torch fell over and went out, leaving them in Erebus-like darkness.

"Let's git out o' hyer."

It was Nick who spoke, but his voice sounded strangely hollow and ghost-like there in the terrible blackness. Neither of the others uttered a word, but a moment later the canoe began to move and soon they crept out through the bushes and were once more afloat on the open lake. Instantly they all looked around for the missing canoe and its fair occupant.

"Look thar!" cried the old ranger. "W'at's them?"

He pointed away to where the shadows still lay upon the bosom of the lake, and there they plainly saw moving bodies.

"Canoes!" was Paul's instant reply. "Nida has been carried away!"

With one sweep of the paddle he swung the canoe round and headed it toward the two canoes which were skulking along in the shadows. Then he sent the light craft forward with a swiftness that was remarkable. The other boat was not so very far away, and Paul began to overhaul them with amazing rapidity.

"Pull, Paul, pull!" exclaimed Mr. Errol, in great excitement. "We are gaining! we shall catch them!"

"Yes," grunted Nick, "an' we'll ketch er leetle ole Jim Hill o' er fight I'm a-thinkin'. Git yer resolver reddey, Elias, an' prepare ter guv 'em partwickerler thunder. Soon ther crystal water o' this beaucherful lake sitterwated in ther most forsaken spot in God's kentry will be stained with gore. Strike hard an' sink ther shaft deepl! Guv 'em glory ter Gideon!"

The old borderman began to examine his revolvers very coolly. He had discarded the dead Indian's clothing, having his own beneath, and had washed the paint from his face before Paul joined the party on the shore. Hidden beneath the Indian's garb he had had his own trusty revolvers and knife. His rifle he had lost in the battle beside the Niobrara, and, having to leave the sportsmen's camp so suddenly, had not recovered it.

Suddenly a cry for help—a feminine cry—came floating over the bosom of the lake.

"Gods!" cried the ranchman, with great excitement. "That was Nida's voice! Pull, lad, pull!"

But it was not necessary to tell Paul to pull, for he was doing his level best. Suddenly one of the canoes stopped.

"They're goin' ter wait fer us," said Nick, quietly. "Ther derned skunks kalkerlate ter keep us back w'ile their comrades in cussidness git erway with ther gal. Elias, it behooves you to fight like ther devil wuz standin' in yer boots, ef you ever hope ter snatch yer darter from ther pests o' ther plains. We must let ourselves loose like we wuz possessed by seventeen demons an' er hydra-headed hoodoo. Thar will soon be music onto the air, an' I wisht Samuel Krick wuz hyer ter take er han' in ther merry siary-nade."

In a few moments they came close to the canoe that appeared to be waiting for them. There were three persons in the craft—two white men and an Indian. When they were a short dis-

away, one of the white men suddenly

"Now!"

In an instant our friend knew what was coming and "ducked." It was well that they did, for at that moment the occupants of the other canoe fired, and three bullets went whistling over the heads of the pursuers and screaming away over the bosom of the lake. The battle was fairly begun.

"Now!" cried Old Nick. "Guv 'em fire an' brimstun!"

But the white men and the Indian also "ducked," and did not appear to be injured after the return volley. Then, when the canoes were not twice their lengths apart, both parties uttered a simultaneous yell and discharged their weapons together. The sound rolled away over the little lake in a most appalling volume. The canoes came still nearer, and some of both parties arose to their feet in their excitement. When less than ten feet separated them, Old Nick shot the red-skin through the head and the savage fell into the water, nearly overturning the canoe.

"Whoopie!" yelled the excited old fellow. "Pump it ter 'em, pards! Guv 'em er taste o' Sweet By an' By!"

But the old borderman's joy was short-lived, for suddenly he gave a groan and sunk down in the canoe, gasping: "I'm shot!"

An instant later the canoes came together with a shock that overturned them both, throwing the fighting men into the water and suddenly ending the battle. Prairie Paul felt something grasp him and cling closely. At first he thought it one of his foes, but in a moment Mr. Errol's head arose above the water and the rancher gurgled:

"Help—can't swim!"

"Trust to me," was the youth's reply, as he saw two heads moving away on the surface of the lake toward the shore and reasoned that the outlaws had given over the fight.

With some difficulty the youth succeeded in supporting the ranchman to the shore. Some time before he reached a point where he could touch the bottom, he saw two figures emerge from the water and dash away from the lake. He finally brought Errol safely to land, and a few moments later the friends whom they had left upon the opposite shore came hurrying round and joined them, but too late to render any assistance. The bandits had obtained possession of the girl once more and disappeared amid the shadows of the hills.

"Whar's Nick?" asked the guide.

Then Paul told how the veteran had said that he was shot and had not appeared since the canoe was overturned.

"My God!" exclaimed Sam. "I'm erfeered my ole pard's gone this time fer sure! We'll prob'ly fine his body floatin' on ther lake in the mornin'. Poor Nick!"

Mr. Errol stood wringing his hands and gazing helplessly around him. Touched by the pitiful sight, Wild Vulcan rode to his side, and leaning in the saddle, laid his hand on the rancher's arm, as he slowly said:

"Don't give up, man! It's always the darkest just before dawn. Think of me. For fourteen years I have been searching for my lost little ones. The best thing that this party can do is remain beside this lake and rest till morning. Your horses *must* have rest. As for Tornado, he seems to have muscles of steel. I shall follow these outlaws *now*, and I hope to be able to restore your child to you within a few hours at the most. Wait for me."

Then he wheeled his horse sharply and rode away at a gallop, quickly disappearing amid the hills.

The party decided that there was nothing for it but wait till morning, and so they made preparations to do so. While they were doing this, Colonel Dangler rode serenely into camp—if a *bivouac* beneath the open sky may be called a camp.

When questioned, the colonel said that he had fallen behind to examine some alkaline crystals that he saw gleaming in the moonlight. He appeared quite amazed when he learned what had occurred, and he freely consoled with Mr. Errol, acting in a manner that appeared quite natural and unassuming. But, there was more than one of the party who regarded the ex-officer with suspicion.

CHAPTER XV.

WILD VULCAN TO THE RESCUE.

WILD VULCAN, the strange plainsman, had an idea of the direction in which the kidnappers would move after leaving Pearl Lake. He knew that the outlaws must be anxious to get

the captive maiden safely to one of their retreats somewhere in the heart of the Bad Lands. It was said that there was a vast fertile tract somewhere near the source of a creek which emptied into the Snake River, a tributary of the Niobrara. It was probable that the Rustlers had a retreat near that spot, where the stolen cattle could graze and have plenty of water.

The rider of the black horse moved forward at a swinging gallop, keeping his eyes well about him, for he knew that the kidnappers had not a very great start, and he might come upon them when he least expected. He fancied that the party that had Nida in their possession was not very large. He believed that quite a large number of the outlaws had lingered in the vicinity of the party that had remained behind on the bank of the Niobrara; but the ranchmen, Errol and Skywood, had trusted their wives in the care of Riata Rube and the cowboys who had remained behind to look after the camp. Would they find them all safe when they returned?

Vulcan did not attempt to urge his horse faster than the animal seemed inclined to go. He had become thoroughly familiar with the intelligent beast and knew that Tornado did not need to be urged unless the case was one of life and death and an instant spurt was needed. As Vulcan had said, the noble animal seemed built of steel, and appeared to be almost as untiring as a piece of machinery.

"There is work ahead, old boy," said the strange man, falling into his usual habit of talking softly to the intelligent animal when they were together alone. "If you will take me to the kidnappers of the rancher's daughter, I will undertake to rescue the girls single-handed. How is that, Tornado? Can you do your part, do you think?"

The horse tossed its proud head, as if to reply in the affirmative, and galloped steadily onward.

"Now mind your promise," cautioned the rider, as if the animal he bestrode had really understood his words and given a promise to do its part. "If you fail me this time, I shall lose faith in you. The white horse and rider escaped us, and one failure is a great sufficiency for a single night."

On, on they went, steadily onward from the lake into the weird wild land. The moon was behind them hovering high in the sky, making the swift-moving figures of man and horse seem like one black shadow sweeping through the desert.

How long he rode he did not know. Suddenly at no great distance he heard shouts and shots in swift succession. He waited to hear no more, but, with a sharp-spoken word to Tornado, dashed toward the point from which the sounds came. Wheeling round the foot of a low hill, he came upon a singular scene revealed by the moonlight.

One man facing six!

The unknown, who was so greatly outnumbered, had turned his back toward the hill, and in each hand he held a revolver, the muzzles of which covered the six in the group before him. Two men lay dead on the ground.

But almost the first object that caught Wild Vulcan's eye was the figure of a girl who was crouching close behind the one brave man who so fearlessly faced six foes. Something told the rider of the black horse that it was the maiden for whom he was searching—the kidnapped Prairie Flower!

In a moment Vulcan knew that the maiden's lone defender must be a friend. The others were probably outlaws who did not dare attack the brave fellow who faced them lest they injure the girl.

With the bridle-rein in his teeth and a heavy revolver in each hand, Wild Vulcan swept down upon the amazed bandits, opening fire and dropping two of them. The others did not linger, but the way they vanished in the nearest shadows was simply remarkable. The defender of the girl took one look at the new-comer, then sprang away, apparently in pursuit of the fleeing desperadoes, firing one or two shots as he went, and soon disappeared as the others had, amid the shadows. It was a singular move and was quite unlooked-for by Wild Vulcan.

As her defender disappeared as well as her foes, the girl leaped to her feet and stood facing the man on the black horse, seeming undecided whether to run away or not. Vulcan drew rein, saying quietly:

"Are you Miss Errol?"

The maiden shrunk away when she heard his voice and saw his face, for she recognized the wild-appearing slayer of her original kidnappers,

Tom and Jack. But she summoned courage to reply:

"Yes, sir, I am Nida Errol."

"Good!" exclaimed the Lone Ranger, with deep satisfaction. "I am satisfied that Providence guided me to this spot."

His voice seemed pleasant enough and there was no sign of madness in his manner. Nida felt her fear suddenly leave her, and she cried:

"Oh, sir! you have been searching for me! You know father?"

"Yes, I have been searching for you and I know your father. Now that I have found you, I will take you to him."

"Heaven bless you! How foolish I was, for I thought you an enemy! Where is father?"

"At Pearl Lake, where you were captured a second time by the desperadoes of this desert land. I promised him that I would find you; I have kept my promise."

He sprang down and quickly examined the four dead outlaws. The moonlight fell upon their ghastly faces and showed him that the one he sought was not there. He turned away with a sigh, putting his hand to his head and muttering:

"Oh, Lord, how long?"

Nida advanced fearlessly to his side.

"Will you bury them?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"No; let their comrades in crime attend to that. We will leave them lying where they fell. Come, let me assist you to mount."

"Yes," she said, eagerly, "let's get away, for the Rustlers may return. There are others near. They had only halted a moment when that strange man seized me and ran away into the shadows. Eight of them sprang from their horses, leaving the animals in the care of the others, and pursued us."

"Who was your strange friend?" asked Vulcan, as he assisted her to mount, and they started away, the plainsman walking beside the horse.

"I do not know. He was quite wet, and the others thought him one of their companions who was engaged in the battle on the lake. If he was not one of their party he tricked them nicely, for they did not suspect him till he made the attempt to carry me away."

Wild Vulcan was puzzled. The strange action of the man in running away after the outlaws had surprised him; but finally he believed that he saw a ray of light.

"Miss Errol, I believe that the man who attempted to carry you away was one of the bandits."

"Then how do you account for his action? Why, he shot two of the men who pursued us!"

"He was going into business for himself. Perhaps he had taken a fancy to capture the whole of the reward which your father would be liable to offer for your safe return, and so he took desperate chances."

"It may be that you are right, but for some reason, I do not think he was a bad man."

"If he was not he acted strangely in running away. I cannot help thinking that he was afraid of me, and if he was honest he had no reason for fear."

Still, Nida was not convinced. She could not think that the man who had seemed so brave was an outlaw.

Finally, Wild Vulcan asked her how she came to be captured a second time.

"I hardly know myself," she replied. "I fell asleep in the canoe, and Paul Rickway was with me in the cave. I was so tired that I could not keep awake, and I felt safe with Paul watching near. How long I slept I cannot tell, but I was awakened by the canoe rocking, and I looked up to see the bearded face of a strange man bending over me. Before I could cry out, he grasped me in his arms and placed his hand over my mouth. Then they carried me away over the lake. I saw a canoe pursuing, and called for help. One of the boats containing three men stopped to intercept the pursuing canoe. When we reached the shore I heard them fighting on the lake. The rough men hurriedly placed me on a horse, and several rode away with me, while one or two waited with some horses for their friends who were fighting on the lake. That is all I know about it. I do not even know what became of Paul."

"He is quite safe, Miss Errol. He was with your father when I left."

"Thank Heaven!"

Vulcan St. Clair looked up into the maiden's face and studied it closely for several moments, as he walked along. At length he said:

"I had a little daughter long, long ago, but she was carried away by the chief of this very gang of bandits, and the wretch slew my poor

wife. He left me for dead, but I came back to life to hunt him to his doom, and I hope to find my child at last. If she is alive, she should be about as old as you."

At that moment Nida gave a little cry. A few rods away were the strange white horse and ghostly rider—the White Spirit. Wild Vulcan saw the figures and cried:

"As God is my judge, I believe that girl is my long-lost child!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE ARROW IN THE HEART.

FOR an instant the phantom-like horse and rider remained perfectly motionless, both the animal and the girl seeming to be staring straight at Wild Vulcan and the maiden on the black steed. The face of the unknown, although pale, looked very beautiful as revealed by the clear moonlight. Suddenly she lifted her hand warningly, and cried in a clear tone:

"Fly, fly! You will be pursued!"

Then the pale steed sprang away suddenly, and soon disappeared amid the hills. Vulcan uttered a groan when they had vanished.

"Oh, God!" he sighed. "Am I never to know the truth? Many times have I tried to speak with that mysterious girl, but she always eludes me. She is one of the unsolvable riddles of the great plains. For some time I have thought that she is my lost child, but I have not been able to discover whether I am right or wrong. Of one thing I am satisfied: She is in some way connected with the outlaws. That simply convinces me that there is but little doubt concerning her being my own daughter."

"I hope that it may prove so, and that you may be reunited at last," said Nida.

"I pray God that it may turn out thus. Something tells me that my child is not dead and I shall find her in the end. I then shall have something to live for."

"But she said that we should be pursued."

"True; and perhaps I had better mount behind you, and let Tornado take us out of this vicinity as swiftly as possible."

An hour later the guard of the camp beside Pearl Lake challenged Wild Vulcan, and soon Nida was in her overjoyed father's arms. Of course the entire camp was aroused, and great was the joy of all when they learned that St. Clair had returned with the missing girl. Of all? No, there was one who, although he appeared as delighted as the rest, cursed; down deep within whose treacherous black heart was vindictive purpose.

"God bless you, my friend!" cried Elias Errol, as his right hand clasped that of the Lone Rider, while his left arm held his restored child close to his heart. "God bless you! My heart is full and I cannot say more now. Some time—"

"That is enough," asserted the prairie ranger, his face beaming with a look of deep pleasure. "I am more than repaid for all that I have done."

Colonel Danglar came forward.

"Errol, this is a great piece of fortune. I congratulate you, and also Miss Nida, who has been fortunate enough to escape from the hands of those miserable ruffians at last."

"Not escaped," corrected the maiden, calmly. "I was rescued by a brave, noble man, whom I shall always honor and respect!"

"Thank you, Miss Errol," bowed Vulcan, removing his hat. "I simply speak the truth when I say that the pleasure of being of service to you was greater than any I have felt for years. One look from your pure eyes would repay me for any danger I might encounter while performing such a pleasant duty."

As gallantly spoken as the speech of an olden knight to some fair one whom he esteemed! Yet the man knew nothing of *parlor etiquette*. His most familiar companions for years had been the mountains and the plains, the brooks and the wild-flowers, the stars and the sky; but he was a gentleman of nature.

Suddenly Nida caught sight of Paul standing in the background, and quietly watching the scene. In a moment she started from her father's arms, and ran toward her silent lover with her hands outstretched. With a glad smile on his handsome face, he caught them both; then, with girlish impulsiveness, she kissed him.

"Right slap on ther spot!" exclaimed Sam Krick, whom thus far she had failed to notice.

"Oh, Sam!" she cried, turning her crimson face toward the guide, for she was blushing at her own hasty act, "I am so glad to see you that you shall have the mate to it."

And before he comprehended what she meant, she had kissed him. Probably such a thing had not happened to the old fellow for years, and

he staggered back as if struck, faintly gasping: "Great Jonah!"

Then Nida went round and shook hands with every one of the cowboys, with whom she was a great favorite, and there was not one of them in the party but would have fought for her to the last gasp.

When this was over, she approached the spot where, with some surprise, she saw her father and Paul talking together. Danglar was standing a short distance away, watching everything with a poorly concealed scowl on his face.

"My child," said Mr. Errol, taking her hands, and gazing lovingly into her eyes, "God has been very good to restore you to me unharmed. I promised your mother that I would surely bring you back to her, and I shall be able to keep my word. But everything—the happiness of this moment—is due entirely to our many kind friends. Why, but for Paul here I would have been drowned in this very lake! He saved my life, and it will be a long day before I forget such a service."

The youth attempted to make some protests, but the ranchman silenced him with a laugh and these words:

"There, there, young man! Do not attempt to excuse your act or I shall be tempted to believe that you regret pulling me out of the deep water."

Colonel Danglar heard it all, and he turned away.

"The cursed brat holds the whip-hand now!" he hoarsely breathed. "But I am not beaten, by any means. Only for this beastly slip-up, the game would be mine. Oh, some one shall suffer for it!"

"Did ye speak ter me, kernel?" inquired the guide, appearing at the man's elbow with such suddenness that Danglar gave a slight jump and uttered an oath.

"No, I didn't!"

The ex-officer fairly snarled the words as he gave Sam a vicious glare and walked on. The old fellow stood and watched him, slowly shaking his head, and muttering:

"Snake, snake! I know it!"

Some time later, the colonel saw Paul and Nida standing on the shore of the lake talking in low tones. He clinched his hands and fairly gnashed his teeth with impotent rage. Then as he stood watching the unconscious lovers, he muttered:

"Enjoy each other's society while you may, for it will all have an end right soon! I am not to be forever balked. There are two persons who must die, and that young upstart is one of them. He shall die! I will put him out of my way, even if I have to wield the knife that drinks his heart's blood!"

"Errol is a fool! I never saw a man so easily deceived. Little he dreams who I am. Ha! ha! If he did, he would fly at my throat like a mad-dog. And that other," sinking his voice to a whisper, "He is the only man on the face of the earth that I fear, and I do fear him. But he is nothing more than human, and he must go under."

"Curse you!" shaking his fist at the back of the young man on the lake-shore. "You are the first one. If I could only get a word to—By Jove! they will be hanging in this vicinity, and I may be able to do so before morning. From this time on I shall devote my energies to getting you out of my way. I shall triumph in the end!"

The camp was kept under double guard the remainder of the night, but nothing further occurred to disturb the party, and they secured a much-needed rest. When the first streaks of dawn were in the sky every one was astir, and preparations were made for departure. But the guide would not leave the lake till he had made a rigid search for the body of his old friend.

"I'd like ter giv poor Ole Nick decent burry-al," he said, as he wiped a mist out of his eyes. "He was ther truest frien' a man ever had. Poor boy! If I ever git ter Glory, I'll be shore ter find him settin' on one o' ther highest cushioned eats er playin' o' harmonica with golden strings or suthin' sich like."

But, although the two overturned canoes were recovered and they cruised all over the lake, they could not find a trace of Old Nick's body. Sam was loth to give up the hunt, but sunrise and the impatience of the party to start forced him to do so. However, both he and Paul said that as soon as they saw Mr. Errol and Nida safely with the rest of the party, they should return and try to find the body and give it burial.

Except for the untimely fate of Old Nick there would have been nothing to mar the happiness of the party that turned their backs to Pearl Lake and rode away toward the distant

Niobrara. Sam took his place at the head. Wild Vulcan rode beside him, still moody and silent. Next came some of the cowboys with Mr. Errol and Nida. Occasionally Paul would gallop alongside the maiden and exchange a few words with her. Colonel Danglar fell back to the very rear and watched everything with eyes in which gleamed a look of expectancy.

For more than an hour they rode thus, then, of a sudden, the whip-like crack of a rifle came over the sandy waste and a small puff of smoke was seen near the foot of a small hill some distance away. Paul Rickway uttered an exclamation and came near falling from the saddle.

"What is it?" exclaimed one of the cowboys. "I believe I am shot in the shoulder," replied the youth, as he calmly measured the distance between himself and the puff of smoke. "That fellow is a good marksman if he selected me for a target."

"There he goes!" cried Mr. Errol, as a horse and rider were seen to dash out from behind the hill. "It is an Indian!"

Without a word, Wild Vulcan turned his black steed and started in pursuit of the would-be assassin.

"It's good-by, Johnny, fer thet red sarnip now," observed the guide. "But say, lad, how bad are ye hit? Ther blood's drappin' off ther eends o' yer fingers!"

"I will dress the wound," said the ranchman, who had studied surgery. "We will stop and attend to it; it bleeds as if it might be serious."

But, when Paul's coat was removed and his shoulder bared, it was found that, although it bled profusely, the wound was not of a serious nature. Nida, pale-faced and trembling, received this intelligence with untold relief.

Suddenly, as Mr. Errol was washing the blood away, preparatory to bandaging the wound, he dropped the canteen of water and uttered a great cry of amazement. On the arm near the shoulder was a design pricked into the flesh with India ink—a heart pierced by an arrow, and within the heart the letters "E. K. E."

For a moment the ranchman gazed at the marks like one dazed. He seemed stunned, stupefied by the unexpected sight. Finally, he muttered, still staring at the letters encircled by the arrow-pierced heart:

"My God! my God!"

"What is it?" asked Paul, in wondering amazement.

"That heart—arrow—those letters! I believe that my hand made them all, and that you are my own son!"

CHAPTER XVII.

BLEEDING HEARTS AND HAPPY ONES.

ELIAS ERROL's words caused more than one of those who heard them to utter exclamations of amazement, for it seemed quite impossible that the young prairie ranger could be the ranchman's son. And Paul? Errol's words had fallen upon his ears like the knell of doom. He felt no joy at the revelation that they brought, for his eyes roved to Nida's face and he saw that she was as white as a corpse. She had heard her father's words. Could it be that her lover—brave Prairie Paul—was her own brother? The thought filled her heart with a feeling of exquisite anguish such as she had never known before.

"There must be some mistake," said the youth, hoarsely. "It cannot be that I am your son, Mr. Errol."

The rancher did not speak. His face was also very white, and his soul seemed terribly shaken by his discovery. Indeed, his emotion was so great that he had to relinquish the task of bandaging the wound to Sam Krick. The old guide looked in the youth's face and understood the situation.

"Keep er stiff upper lip, lad," he said, softly and encouragingly, as he attended to the wound. "There's probly sum' mistake sum'whar', an' it will all cum' out right in ther eend."

Paul said nothing, for his tongue seemed frozen in his mouth. He saw Nida turn away with a despairing gesture, and he knew that her heart was torn with pain. He would have hastened to her, but a feeling of strange repulsion prevented. His sister! At that moment his heart was filled with rage against the bitter black fate that had cursed them both by making them blood relatives. But it might not be so; he would not give up hope.

As he turned away after the wound was attended to, his eyes encountered the triumphantly glowing orbs of Colonel Danglar, and the ex-officer said, with a sneering smile:

"Young man, allow me to congratulate you upon having found a father and a sister."

"Keep your congratulations for those who want them," was the low, fierce reply. "And let me tell you, if Nida Errol is my sister, I would rather kill her with my own hand than have her become the wife of such a scoundrel as I believe you to be!"

Then the youth sprang upon the back of the horse, regardless of Danglar's muttered oaths and threatening gesture.

The party decided to press on without waiting for Wild Vulcan's return, satisfied that the plainsman would overtake them before long. They had not moved far when the faint far-away boom of the Prairie Thunderbolt's rifle came to their ears.

"That's ther death-knell o' ther red varmint w'at tried ter lay ye out, lad," said the guide.

An hour later Wild Vulcan joined them. His manner was a little wild as he threw a reeking scalp on the ground in front of Paul's horse, crying:

"There is proof that the would-be assassin did not escape!"

During the forenoon the young plainsman summoned sufficient courage to ride along by the side of Nida for a while and exchange a few words with her. Making sure that no one would hear them he bent toward her saying:

"Don't give up hope, Nida; it may not be so."

"I pray God that it is not," was the reply. "It does not seem that fate can be so cruel."

He saw that she had all that she could do to keep back her tears, and with a few words more, he left her with old Sam. Paul saw that Mr. Errol had been watching him, and he was tempted to join the ranchman and demand an immediate explanation. But, finally, he decided to wait the gentleman's inclination, for he knew that Elias would tell him all, in due time.

It is not necessary to describe the tiresome day's journey. Suffice it to say that they were not molested by any of the outlaws, although they fancied that several times they detected skulking figures in the distance. At night they encamped in the dry bed of a creek, the place being admirably adapted for defense. A small spring of water rose near the camp and made a tiny stream of water that was soon absorbed by the sand; but it provided water for the party and the animals. The poor horses were only too glad to eat the grass around the spring and crop the stray tufts along the watercourse. Another day's journey would bring them to the plains and the river.

That night Paul and Mr. Errol had a long talk together. The ranchman questioned the youth closely about his life, but Paul could tell him nothing that he did not already know.

"I would give much if Nick Rickway was alive, poor fellow!" said the rancher. "He could tell if those marks were on your arm when he snatched you from the Indians. If they were, it is proof conclusive that you are my son. But I do not think there can be a doubt about it. Years ago I pricked a heart pierced by an arrow on the arm of my little boy, who was then two years old. Within the heart I put the letters E. K. E., which are the initials of his name and stand for Edwin King Errol. The marks on your arm have grown faint, as if they had been there for many years, for even India ink marking will fade in time; but they are quite distinct. You must be my boy."

"Was your son captured by Indians?" hoarsely asked the youth.

"No; but he was stolen by my bitterest enemy, Lyman Mesurado. Never mind why we were enemies. That is really of small importance; but we were foes. He was an evil man and hated me with an undying hatred. Once he swore to kill me; but when my child was born he declared that he would kidnap it. These threats frightened my wife greatly, but I laughed at them. However, when the child was two years old, a desperate attempt to kidnap it was made, and came near succeeding. Then I became really alarmed. I offered heavy rewards for the capture of the would-be perpetrators of the crime, but justice never laid her hands on them, if there were more than one. Of course this alarmed me, and, fearing that the wretch might succeed, I marked a heart and arrow on the child's arm and placed his initials within the heart. The work upon your arm is an exact counterpart as I remember that which I did. My worst fears were realized; my child was finally stolen, although we guarded it closely. I will not tell of the grief that the great loss caused us, or of the fruitless efforts which I made to recover the lost one. Years passed, and I came to believe that the child was dead; but

now I am satisfied that you are the long-lost one—you are my son!"

The young man talked with Mr. Errol for a long time, but in the end he was obliged to confess within his heart that everything indicated that the rancher was right and that he was the lost Edwin King Errol. He carefully avoided speaking of Nida.

Although he was weary of body, his mind could not rest, and that night was a long and dreary one for the young plainsman.

We will pass over the minor events of the succeeding day. At nightfall the party had reached the fertile land of the plains and left the desert behind them. But they did not halt. During the day they had again seen distant horsemen, who appeared to be watching them, and they feared an attack, therefore they wished to reach the rest of the party and join forces.

Shortly after nightfall they were joined by a cowboy who had been sent out to look for them. He said that suspicious-appearing persons had been seen lurking in the vicinity of the camp and Riata Rube had moved the entire party to a small island in the river, which could be easily defended. At one particular point the water was so shallow that a horse could pass to the island without swimming.

The horses were nearly exhausted, but the party urged them on, and before the hour of midnight were passing through the water to the island lying in the midst of the moonlit river. The cowboy guard on the island soon awoke the sleeping camp, and the returning ones were received with shouts and cheers of joy. It was a grand reunion and everyone seemed happy, but there were hearts filled with anguish in the midst of all the joy.

When the first excitement of the reunion was over, Mr. Errol took his wife aside and told her of his remarkable discovery. She was amazed and asked him to bring the youthful plainsman to her. But at that moment a wet, dripping figure appeared in the midst of the party and cried:

"Prepare fer war, fer ther varmints o' ther Bad Lan's are cumin' er leetle millyon on er raft, calkorlatin' ter take ye by s'prise w'en ye least 'spect sech er thing. Git ter ther upper eend o' thr islan' an' fight fer yer lives an' ther ladies!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MISTS ARE CLEARED AWAY.

THE words of the water-dripping man created great consternation and excitement on the island, which was augmented by the sudden sullen boom of Wild Vulcan's rifle near at hand, followed by a cry of mortal agony some distance up the river.

"Foller me!" yelled Sam Krick, as he seized his rifle and rushed toward the upper end of the island.

With a cheer, the cowboys followed close to the veteran's heels. When the upper end of the island was reached they saw a large raft crowded with outlaws and Indians floating directly toward it and but a short distance away. The outlaws had timed their approach well, and but for the warning of the unknown man who had evidently swum to the island they would have taken the party by surprise and accomplished their dreadful purpose. But our friends were warned, and it suddenly began to look as if the outlaws crowded together on the raft would get the worst of it, for they presented an excellent target.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Wild Vulcan, standing in the moonlight and waving his hands, each of which held a heavy revolver, above his head. "They are coming to their doom! I have sent one of the demons to the lower regions, and his comrades shall follow! Ha! ha! ha!"

"Reddy, boys!" called out Sam Krick. "Take er good aim an' guv 'em an' interduction ter Helen Blazes! Now, red dy, aim, fire!"

At the word, a heavy volley rung out and the terrible sound rolled away in a dense volume over the silvery moonlit water of the river, to be followed by shrieks and groans of mortal agony. When the smoke lifted, those on the island saw that they had not wasted their lead, for more than one half of the murderous ruffians on the raft had been hurt or slain. Disaster had suddenly overtaken them at the very moment when it seemed that they were about to accomplish their wicked designs, and it was a swift, sure and just retribution. Those who were uninjured were leaping into the water and swimming toward the shore, filled with horror at the unexpected fate of their comrades.

"Hooray!" bellowed old Krick, taking a waltz in the moonlight. "We hev socked thunder ter 'em! Ther tug-o'-war is past an' ther

victory's ours. Let ther rest o' them cusses go; thar hain't ernuff left ter tackle us erg'in."

And so the party refrained from firing on the swimming men, an unexpected mercy under the circumstances.

"That's w'at I call business in er minnit," observed the water-dripping man who had warned the party of their danger, as he stepped out into the moonlight. "In fac', we guv 'em glory ter Gideon."

"W'at!" yelled Sam, turning on the speaker, whose tall, lank form loomed up in comical contrast to the guide's short figure. "Who are you, anyhow?"

The tall man removed his wide-brimmed hat, as he drawled:

"Sam-u-el Krick, you are ther most partwickerler man I ever saw."

Then there was a scene, for the moonlight revealed Old Nick Rickway, alive and grinning in a manner that threatened to break his jaws. When the excitement and surprise caused by the astonishing discovery that Nick was alive had subsided in a measure, Sam cried:

"You contemptible ole fraud! won't northin' kill ye? I'd good mine ter put er bullet through ye and see ef that'd do ther job. We all s'posed yer carcass wuz in Pearl Lake. How in ther name o' ther prophets did ye escape?"

"Wal, I did cum nigh goin' under," acknowledged the strange old plainsman. "But fer er leetle metal locket I hev worn in ther breast o' my shirt fer y'ars, I sh'ud 'a' bin a goner. That locket caught a bullet an' saved my life, but I thort I wuz shot at ther time. W'en we all took er souse inter ther lake, I changed my mine an' finished off one o' ther outlaws. Then I tuck his place and rode away with his companions. In ther excitement they never notissed ther cheat, an' w'en we jined ther party with ther gal, I tried ter resky her. I sh'ud 'a' failed ef ther yere Wild Vulcan hadn't gi'n me er helpin' han'. I knew ther gal wuz all right with him, an' so I follered ther outlaws an' stole er hoss frum 'em. Ther annymile tuck me out o' ther Bad Lan's, but I lost him arter I hit ther river. I got erlong jest ez ther outlaws an' red varmints wuz embarkin' on ther raft, an' I made er clean jump ter git hyer an' warn ye."

"Which gave us another victory," said Mr. Errol, taking the old ranger's hand. "Nick, you have done nobly."

The current swept the raft past the island and it floated on down the river, bearing its ghastly freight.

Suddenly several shrieks of alarm came from the women on the island, and every man sprang to discover what the trouble was. Mrs. Errol, met her husband, crying wildly:

"Nida, Nida! he is carrying her away!"

She pointed toward the lower end of the island, and at that moment the crack of a revolver came to their ears from the point. Led by Prairie Paul, the men rushed forward to discover what it all meant. On the lower shore they found Wild Vulcan supporting Nida on his left arm while his right hand clutched a faintly-smoking revolver. A few feet away close to where a canoe rocked at the water's edge lay the body of a man and the moonlight revealed his face.

It was Colonel Delos Danglar.

"The game is played out," he muttered, faintly, as some of the men bent over him. "I have got it for good. Will some one blow this whistle three times for me? It is not a trick, but will call one to my side whom I wish to see before I die."

Riata Rube took the silver whistle which the wounded schemer had produced, and gave three short, sharp blasts upon it. They all recognized the sound—it was the same whistle that had shrieked in the midst of the camp during the first attack of the outlaws.

The entire party gathered near the dying man, and he was placed upon a blanket and made as comfortable as possible, for when he had examined Danglar's wound, Mr. Errol asserted that it would soon end his life.

"I knew it from the first," said the baffled plotter, calmly. "But for that man"—pointing at Wild Vulcan, who was standing grim and silent near at hand—"I should have been successful in my attempt to carry Nida away. He shot me just as I was about lifting her into the canoe."

At this moment a canoe was seen to shoot out from one of the shores and rapidly approach the island. In it sat a single white-robed figure, and as it came nearer mutterings of amazement came from several of the party, for they recognized the occupant of the craft as the girl rider of the white horse—the so-called "White Spirit of the Niobrara."

Soon the canoe reached the island, and the white-robed girl sprung out. She saw the man lying upon the blanket and sprung toward him, sinking upon her knees by his side and crying:

"Oh, father, father! you are hurt!"

"Yes, Caro," was the faint reply, "I am dying."

The girl burst into tears, wringing her hands and sobbing:

"Oh, no, no, no! It cannot be!"

"Do not weep for me, Caro," said the doomed man, with a look of genuine pain on his face as he witnessed her grief. "Before these people I want you to answer one question before—I die. I have been a bad—a wicked man all my life; but, say truly, did I ever—misuse you, Caro?"

"Never, never! You have always been good to your little Caro, father."

"Yet I am not your father!"

The girl started back aghast.

"Not my father?" she cried.

"No, child, I am not. There—stands your true father!"

He raised his hand and pointed straight at *Old Nick Rickway*!

"As God hears me," gasped the dying wretch, "that is the truth. I stole her years ago, for *I am Bad Lands Bill*!"

This declaration fairly astounded those who heard it. It did not seem possible that the person whom they had known as Colonel Delos Danglar was the notorious desperado and chief of cattle-thieves, Bad Lands Bill. Yet the dying man had declared it with his own mouth. They had all been cunningly deceived.

Wild Vulcan uttered a great cry and sprung forward to bend over the man and stare searchingly into his pale face, passing his hand over his forehead as if to clear away the mists which shrouded his brain.

"Oh, fool that I was!" he exclaimed. "Years have changed that face, but I know it now. Missouri Marl, murderer of my wife—kidnaper!—where is my child?"

The outlaw raised himself a little, and, pointing straight at Nida Errol, replied:

"I believe that girl is your child!"

Then he sunk back with a faint moan, closing his eyes and appearing to be dead for a few moments. A breathless silence rested on the throng, broken only by the low sobbing of the white-robed figure crouching by the bandit chief's side. Slowly the man's eyes opened and fixed themselves upon Elias Errol with a dim, far-away look.

"Errol," he faintly gasped—"Errol, you—have lived to—to triumph over—your hated enemy, Lyman Mesurado. I—am—he!"

Then the eyelids sunk again—a low, gasping moan—the man's wicked life was ended!

There is a lonely grave upon the little island in the Niobrara, and there beneath the blue Nebraska skies rests the body of the man who as Bad Lands Bill was once a terror to the ranchmen lower down the river. He met a merciful death for one who had committed so many crimes, and although Justice was tardy in ending his wicked career her relentless hand fell upon him at last.

With their final defeat and the death of their chief, the gang of rustlers was broken up forever; and our friends were not molested on their homeward return from what had proved to be a most exciting and adventurous pleasure excursion.

Nida was not Mr. Errol's daughter, but was a child which, long years before, Old Nick Rickway, who was searching for his own daughter, had rescued from the outlaws, who were at this time carrying on their depredations in Eastern Kansas. He had left her with some friends, who had given her to Mr. and Mrs. Errol, and she had grown up believing them to be her true parents, although she could faintly remember one or two of the scenes when she was with her outlaw keepers. Both Mr. and Mrs. Errol had loved her as if she were their own child, for in a great measure she had filled the void made by the theft of their boy. But now everything was explained. She was the long lost-child of Vulcan St. Clair, and she joyfully accepted him as her father, for under those circumstances Paul, or Edwin, could not be her brother and was free to become something more. And in time he did—her husband.

Old Nick Rickway had also found his daughter, and he was happy. Caro, at the command of the man whom she had thought her father, had rode the plains on her white steed, clad in snow-white robes and with her face powdered till it resembled that of a dead person. Bad Lands Bill had thought that she might frighten superstitious people from the Upper Niobrara and the

Bad Lands, so that there would be less danger of his retreat being discovered. At first, it was hard for the girl to accept Old Nick as her father, but in time she did and grew to love the whimsical old fellow, who was the soul of honor and kindness. She finally became the bride of the gallant young cowboy, Riata Rube, and they have a ranch of their own on the Upper Niobrara, where Old Nick or his boon companion Sam, the guide, both of whom are restless wanderers, are always welcome. They are the same queer, jolly old fellows, and old age does not seem to make any impression on them. Sam's supply of yarns is unexhaustible, and he still refers to his "Uncle Josh" as the sharpest man in all the wide world.

Vulcan St. Clair settled down to a quiet life when his mission of vengeance was ended, and from his appearance, no one would ever dream that once he was called Wild Vulcan, the Prairie Thunderbolt.

THE END.

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